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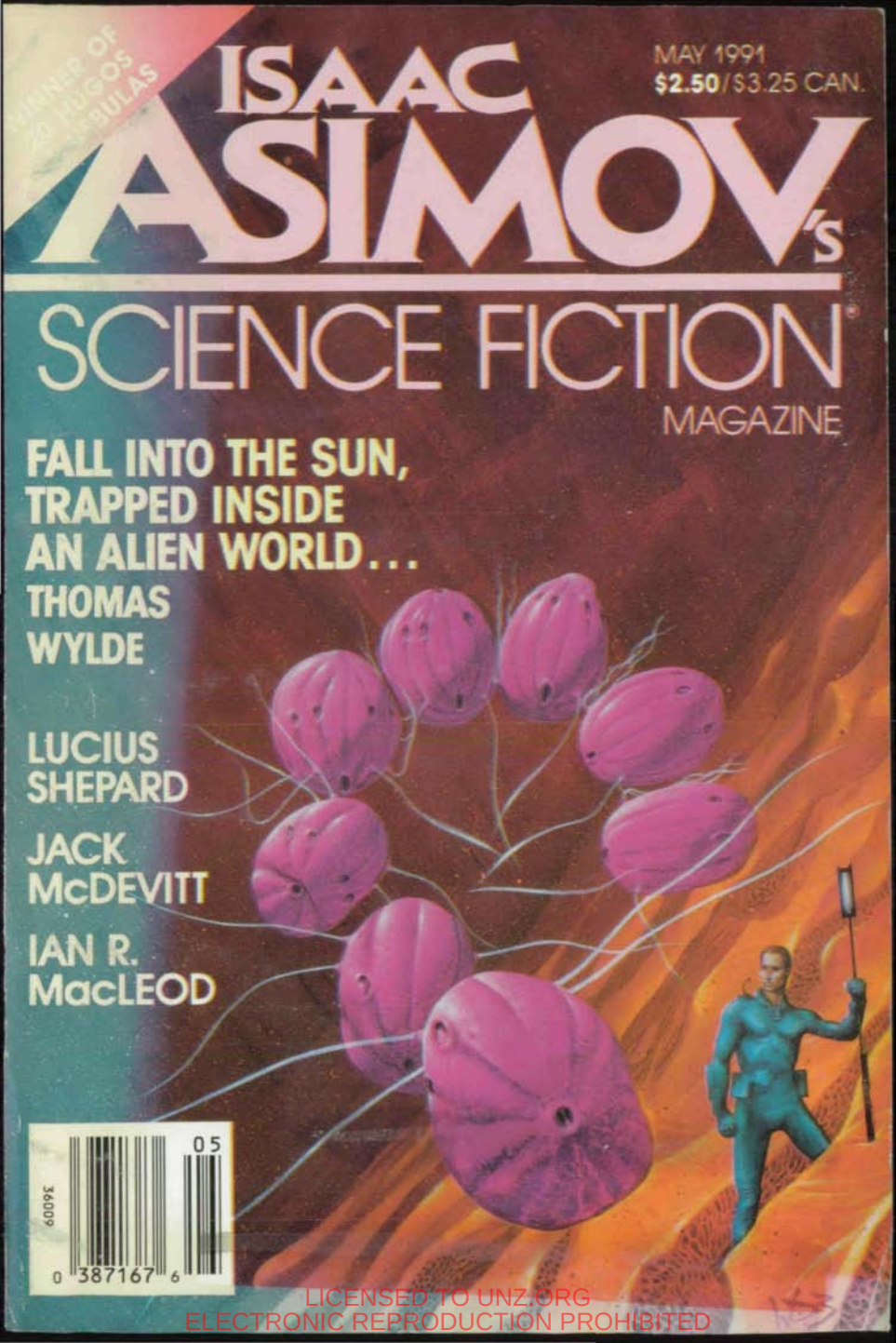

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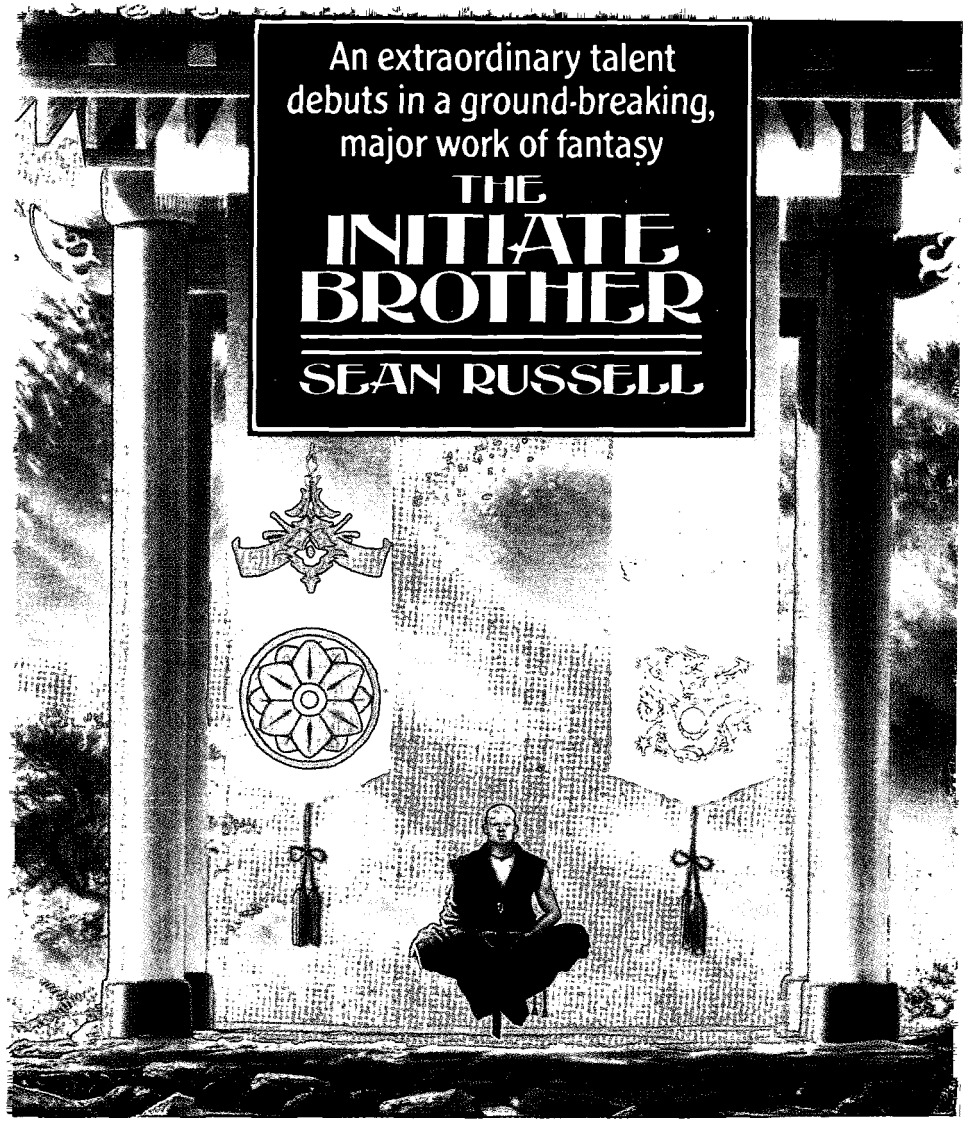

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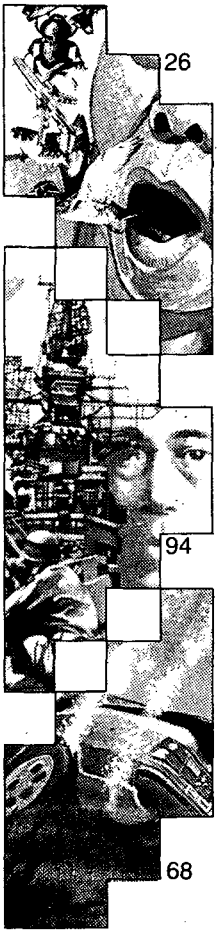

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

HELP?

When I was eighteen, I brought in my first manuscript (with fear and trembling) to the office of John W. Campbell, Jr., the legendary editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*.

He was unbelievably kind to me. He read the manuscript immediately, and though he rejected it, his letter of rejection was warm and helpful. For a period of four years, I visited him monthly to discuss my ideas and my manuscripts. He was intimately involved with the development of my Three Laws of Robotics, with my story "Nightfall" and with the initiation of the Foundation series.

As it happens, I have a horror of seeming ungrateful. It has always been necessary for me to speak up loudly for all the people who have helped me, one way or another; to consider myself beholden to them; and *never* to feel that anything I ever do in return wipes out my obligation. Where writing is concerned, I can, and do, make a case for the help given me by people such as Frederik Pohl, Clifford D. Simak, L. Sprague de Camp, Willy Ley, Lester del Rey and many others, sometimes, even, when they themselves are not particularly aware of what they have done for me.

But, of course, no one outranks John Campbell in this respect and I never weary, day in and day out, of repeating endlessly how good he was to me when I was a callow youth.

I pay a price for it, for I receive numerous letters from people who want me to help them and who say, "Remember how John Campbell helped you when you needed it."

Well, let's go over the facts:

1) It was John Campbell's job to help young writers. He was an editor—a great editor—and he had to get good stories for his magazine. He had to keep his eyes open for new young writers of promise and move heaven and earth to see to it that they worked away at their craft and learned how to improve their writing. Whatever he could do in that direction, he could and did do, primarily for the magazine, rather than for the writer.

Any editor must do the same if he has the same regard for his craft that John had. Gardner Dozois's eyes are always open for new talent

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and he will not stint at helping them—for the magazine.

I, on the other hand, am not an editor, and so I don't do the kind of thing that John did and Gardner does.

2) John Campbell had a peculiar talent. He could recognize a promising young writer even if the story was absolutely unpublishable. He knew how to encourage such a writer and chivvy him into improvement. There was none better at this. I believe that Gardner has the same talent. I, on the other hand, don't have the talent at all. I can't tell if a beginner shows promise or not. I can't tell if a story is any good or not. I can't tell if one of my own stories is any good or not. That's why I'm not an editor and why I wouldn't dream of interfering with Gardner's work.

3) John Campbell by no means helped *everyone*. He helped the young Isaac Asimov, because he recognized him as the young Isaac Asimov, but at least ninety-nine writers out of a hundred, he did not help, for he realized that in their case, there would be no point in doing so. He was not always right. He missed the young Ray Bradbury, for instance; but he was right often enough.

And, of course, the decision was *his*. I never asked him to help me. I merely brought in my manuscripts. Had the first few shown no promise whatever, he would have become unavailable to me and I would have had to leave the man-

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uscripts with the receptionist or send them in by mail.

Yet there are people who understand none of this, and who write to me with *demands* for help, on the grounds that I was helped when I was young.

But you know, as I grow older, I can detect a certain curmudgeonry developing about me. As my time on Earth grows shorter (I must be realistic about this) I become more resistant to wasting my time in order to meet unrealistic demands.

Last year at "New York is Book Country," when I had been signing books for hours (literally), I grew tired and a little rebellious. A woman approached and wanted a book signed, "To Little Montesquieu Alexander Yubelessorovich in the earnest hope that he will grow up to study hard and be a great credit to his mother and all his family" and I looked up, sighed, and said, "If you don't mind, I will just sign my name." A look of fury swept over her face and she went stamping away. Tough!

I received some bookplates in the mail from a complete stranger and was instructed to sign them, "To my dear friend, so-and-so." I simply signed my name, and scrawled out a comment that one had to adhere to "truth in advertising."

But it is the periodic demand for help from young and unfledged writers who want that help as their *right* that drives me crazy.

One time, a couple of years ago, I got something even worse. A young man wrote to me and asked that I write a recommendation for him so that he could get into a school. He gave me my instructions. I was to commend him on his character and his intelligence in unmeasured terms.

I was annoyed enough to reply and to point out to him that he was asking me to do something quite unethical—to praise someone I didn't know and to help get him into a school that, perhaps, without my lying recommendation he would not qualify for. Naturally, I said, I couldn't do it, and I was surprised he should ask me to.

Usually, in such cases, the silence of death follows and I hear nothing. This time, though, I got another letter, not from the young man but from his mother. How dare I, she wanted to know, refuse to help her son, when I had received so much help from John Campbell.

As anyone who knows me will tell you, I am a quiet and equable man, not easy to stir to anger, but as the science fiction writer Hal Clement (the gentlest soul who ever lived) once said to me, "Beware the fury of a patient man."

I sent her a nice, stiff letter, smelling slightly of brimstone, in which I said, rather eloquently, that if she could see nothing wrong in asking someone to lie for her son, and if she were teaching him that principle, he would some day end up in the courthouse and he

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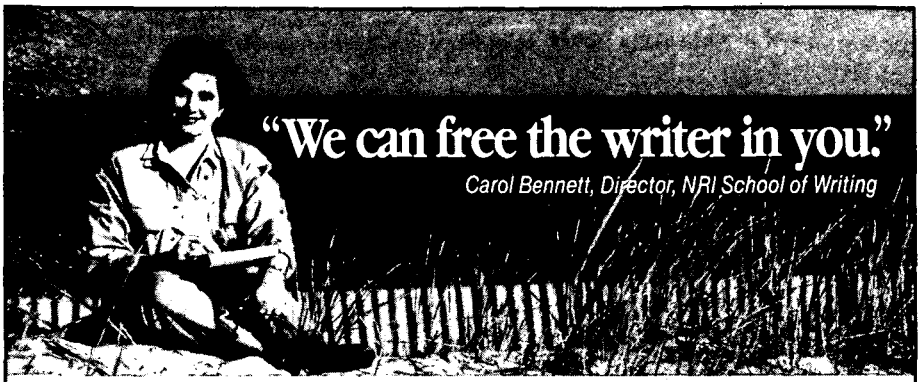

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need not expect me to go bail for him. This time I got no answer.

The reason, however, that I am writing this editorial is a letter I received a few months ago.

Apparently, if I may believe the letter-writer, there is something called "The National Academic Decathlon." I have never heard of it, and perhaps my leg is being pulled, but the letter sounds sincere enough and so, after some thought, I decided to accept it at face value.

In this Decathlon, you have to (among other things, perhaps) read a story and write an analysis of it, thus demonstrating (I suppose) your intelligence and your critical acumen. Perhaps, if you pass this, and other tests, you win some much desired prize—money, a scholarship. The writer did not specify. Apparently, though, he has entered previous Decathlons unsuccessfully. (He refers to himself as a "Decathlete.")

Apparently, my story "The Martian Way" was chosen as one of the reading materials. (So he says, anyway, and it is this which leads me to suspect he may be pulling my leg—but maybe not.)

In any case, I suppose the simple way of dealing with this is to read "The Martian Way," to think about it really hard, and then to analyze it as intelligently as possible. At any rate, if that is not simple, it is at least the honest way of doing it.

There is, of course, another way. You can find someone who has already analyzed it and you can copy his analysis. Unfortunately, the young man writing to me couldn't find such an analysis and so he wrote to me.

He wants me to be so kind as to send him information on the story and/or answer a few questions. He was particularly interested in such things as the theme of the story, any hidden symbolism, hidden ironies and (as he said) just basically anything else I thought was important.

That's a smart young man, if you want to call that sort of thing "smart." All he wanted me to do was to take that portion of the test for him, and he would copy it over into his own handwriting. About the only thing missing was his reminder that I owed this to him because I had once been helped by Campbell.

Need I tell you that I did not oblige him? Because he had *not* invoked the name of Campbell, I was cool enough to answer politely. I pointed out that he was asking me to take the test for him, and I went on to describe the honest way of doing it.

I must have puzzled him. "Honest?" I can hear him saying, "What's that?"

At any rate, I got no answer. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Asimov and Mr. Dozois:

I purchased the July *IAsfm* foremost for the Shepard novella. And I *could* babble on with awe and praise for "Skull City" until my typewriter cartridge runs out. Instead, I'd like to say that I was pleasantly surprised by the Nancy Sterling story, "The Recital." The story moved at a slow and peaceful pace, and I was enthralled by the author's voice. Please continue to publish her stories as you see fit.

Wayne Allen Sallee
Chicago, IL

You needn't babble. You say it directly and with force and that's good enough for us.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In regard to your August issue editorial I would like to make a comment. Steven Spielberg didn't deal with galactic empires in *Star Wars,* because *Star Wars* was written by George Lucas. A careless mistake, I must add, for someone of your stature. I find it bizarre that this was not caught before publication. I hope to enjoy many more years with your magazine.

Love,

Linda Selby
So Pas, CA

P.S. There are probably many spelling errors in my letter, as I lack a spellcheck on my word processor. Please forgive me.

I must admit that, as someone who rarely goes to the movies, I can't tell one Bobbsey Twin from the other.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I just received the July '90 issue of *IAsfm* and immediately proceeded to the editorials and letters sections as is my practice.

I usually find your editorials interesting and this was no exception. The letters were also interesting. However, I am somewhat disturbed by the tone of some of them.

In this particular issue there was one by a Mr. Jerry Pickard that denounced the current style of writing encountered in science fiction magazines. I am not an intellectual, and I do not pretend to know a lot about some of the science that is used in some of these stories. Nor do I attempt to characterize the stories as to whether they fit into my personal definition of what is or is not science fiction. I have been buying *IAsfm* for the past few years for one reason. I

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hope it is the same reason most people buy the magazine.

I ENJOY!!! the stories.

In my job as a salesman I am constantly analyzing accounts, prospective accounts, effective use of my time, sales quotas, etc. I don't want to do this when indulging in one of my favorite hobbies—leisure reading. Why can't people simply have fun?

Also in this issue Baird Searles made an insightful comment about the lack of good information regarding books that are available and what is good reading among those available books. Of course the department "On Books" that he and Norman Spinrad contribute to is a good start to a solution. However, for people like me, who buy books only on occasion for various reasons (cost not being the least of them) it is difficult to rely on the local bookstore. As Mr. Searles points out, these stores are usually understocked. I wonder how a person could be kept current on what is available especially if he is trying to get the works of a few favorite authors such as yourself. I made the faux pas recently in a letter to you of complaining about my perceived lack of science fiction novels you had published in the past year or so. You promptly and correctly set me straight on what you had done and I have since then bought the science fiction books you mentioned and I am still looking for a source for the new Black Widowers book you told me was coming out this year (so far I have not seen it in any of the local bookstores).

There are other authors I have interest in too. For example, I have always enjoyed Harlan Ellison's unique stories. Yet I have no idea what he has had published recently. If there is a simple solution to my problem I would very much like to know it.

Finally, thanks to you and Gardner Dozois and Sheila Williams et al. for giving me so much enjoyment over the years.

Sincerely,

Randy Mosher
Lr. Sackville, NS
CANADA

There is something called Books In Print *for which new editions are published each year and which big bookstores invariably have. Turn to the author volumes, look up your favorite authors and take note of any titles that seem unfamiliar to you, show them to the bookstore manager and ask if he or she has them or can get them.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

On reading your editorial on the English language in the June issue of *IAsfm,* I am motivated to write you for reasons expressed below. But first, I want to describe myself for you. I am sixty-seven years old and a professor of geochemistry at the University of Nevada, Reno. I spent about twenty-four years in the University of California system and at Stanford University and I have read science fiction since my early teens. My interests have been in the history of science and thought, languages, linguistics, and semantics. I especially like your essays and publications on science, which serve as bridges bringing science and technology to

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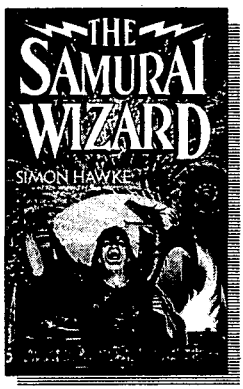

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A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

A warrior must possess many different qualities: bravery, discipline, and honor, to name a few. The mindless mass-produced martial drones of military lore who blindly obey orders and attack like uninspired killing machines are, in the long run, undesirable, and usually ineffective. For me the ideal warrior has to be an individual, respectful, and willing to follow orders, but also capable of thinking on his own, whether samurai of the past or starwolf of the future. ...and when you see me around let's not talk about war, but about fun in the future instead.

ALSO THIS MONTH:

STARWOLVES: Tactical Error
by Thorarinn Gunnarsson

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interested members of the public. I read critically as a professional habit and I have yet to find a misstatement or error of fact in your articles. I love the English language as you obviously do.

I wanted to point out to you that the truly remarkable development of English took place after 1066, when William the Conquerer took over. However, the language used by the British was not much affected by their French-speaking superiors. The two languages more or less were used side by side with minimal interaction, until an intelligentsia developed, artists and writers, who became aware of the limitations of English at the time. These people understandably had acquired a distaste for French. They knew Latin and Greek, however, so they turned deliberately to those languages to construct words needed in English. They were pretty free in how they did this, sometimes simply taking a word, but mostly they generated hybrids of English, Latin, and Greek. In a span of 150 to 200 years, the English language evolved from its primitive form to the language of Shakespeare! This is why more than 90 percent of English is spelled regularly. The rest is the old gutty language we now use for most daily speech, spelled seemingly capriciously. The irregularities really are priceless records of the old spellings.

I thought you might be interested. Keep up the good work.

Frank Dickson, Professor
Department of Geological Sciences
Mackay School of Mines
University of Nevada
Reno, NV 89557

I'm not enough of a linguist to argue with you, but I don't entirely accept your thesis. Many English words are derived from Latin by way of French, and French was indeed the language of the English aristocracy till the fifteenth century. However, as I said, I'm not a linguist.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

First of all, I have to tell you how much your science fiction magazine means to me. I am blind, and I live in a rural part of West Virginia, and I don't get too many chances to go to bookstores. I love science fiction, and your magazine is the best.

I am writing this letter to ask, and if necessary to beg, you for any help, assistance, or information you can give me.

You see, Dr. Asimov, for the last few months, I have been desperately searching for books from the science fiction series called "V." I have called just about every bookstore in West Virginia. Well, it seems that way, anyway. Anyway, it appears that this book series is out-of-print, I HATE THAT PHRASE.

Oh, maybe I should fill you in on exactly what "V" is. The "V" books are based upon the NBC mini-series from 1983, and the television series which followed. I know that writing to you about this is a long shot. You are probably thinking "Good God, who does this idiot girl think I am, the American out-of-print book service?"

I really hate to waste your time like this, but, I'm desperate. It

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doesn't seem as if there is a light at the end of this tunnel.

Surely there is someone out there who can help me. Any kind of information you could give me would be deeply appreciated.

Very Desperate, and Pathetic,

Ann Tate
886A Wills Creek Rd.
Elkview, WV 25071

I'm afraid I can't help you, much as I would like to, but perhaps some of our readers can.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

When I was a youngster I would wait with great anticipation for your next book in the *Foundation* series or for the latest Arthur Clarke story. These days I find that anticipation similarly rekindled by the works of Lucius Shepard in the pages of *IAsfm*. I want to thank you for printing his fascinating stories; I've enjoyed every one of them. Selfishly, my only regret is that his work doesn't appear every month. The July 1990 issue contains a new Shepard story, and that will have to keep me content until his next appearance.

I have been reading *IAsfm* for many years and have been consistently satisfied. As my appreciation of SF has changed and developed, so have the stories in your magazine. Congratulations to you, Mr. Dozois, Ms. Williams, and all the others responsible for the production of such an excellent periodical. Thank you for all the years of enjoyable reading.

Richard Kochis
Bangor, ME

And thank you for your kind letter. One is much more easily moved to write when one is dissatisfied than when one is pleased, so every letter that reaches us from a pleased reader is doubly valuable.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Twelve years ago I bought a subscription to this magazine, but cancelled it after only three issues. My impression then was that most of the stories were written by young males who understood Einstein's theories of relativity far better than they understood the art of writing fiction.

I subscribed again to this magazine about three years ago, but this time I did not cancel the subscription. I found that Mr. Dozois published entertaining stories written by *writers*—male *and* female, and of varied ages and types and backgrounds. I now enjoy this magazine more than any of the other magazines I read.

From your point of view, Dr. Asimov, how have the authors featured in this magazine and their stories changed in the past twelve years?

Sincerely,

Dallas Vordahl
13720 E. 26th Avenue
Spokane, WA 99216-0205

In the course of twelve years, new authors come in and old authors may improve. However, in the course of twelve years, we have also had four different editors and each one chooses stories that suit his preferences. Gardner's present preferences may just happen to be yours,

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too, and that makes all the difference.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have just read your editorial "Figurehead" in the July 1990 issue, and I am appalled. The fact that you still call this critic "friend" only delineates your true character—something with which we are already familiar.

Your legions of devoted fans also know another thing: your role at *IAsfm,* for one. There is no need to outline your position there, because we have been reading your columns and stories for years and know the scope of your responsibilities at *IAsfm.*

Indeed, the fact that you feel compelled to explain yourself AT ALL cause me to flare up with indignation. Why should you have to justify your existence, much less your position at a fine publication which bears your name? Does your "friend" have to justify his position anywhere?

Your comments about Davis Publications are absolute truths. I met Joel Davis and Eleanor Sullivan years ago, and I must say that they are and always have been responsible businesspersons with a dedication to reader service. And, yes, Eleanor Sullivan is a harsh mistress with the blue pencil, but I say that she is cruel but FAIR. She has rejected my stories, but I have not gone whimpering to others about misplaced powers. I simply realized that I did not have the particular talent needed to write a story suitable for her magazine's readership. I have not canceled my subscriptions nor have I gone crying to the world, complaining of patronage and favoritism. I decided to head up a company instead!

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I wonder about this "friend" and his motivations. If he had been published as he wished, he would have sipped the sweet nectar of champagne. By not getting his project endorsed by *IAsfm,* I wonder if he decided to strew sour grapes instead.

Keep up the good work . . . and never, NEVER explain yourself again. We loyal and loving readers find it unnecessary. Greatness speaks for itself. Rest on your laurels, Dr. Asimov, and take sniping comments from the source. Or better yet, enjoy the company of your TRUE FRIENDS. You'll need hundreds of years to do this, but I have every faith in you.

Carol Ann Schachter
New York, NY

No, no, I don't throw away my friends. They may be wrong, they may be contrary, they may hurt my feelings, but they are still my friends. It is often I who do or say the wrong thing and I hope that the people I say it to will always consider me a friend anyway. Think of it! How many friends does one have! Don't waste even one.

—Isaac Asimov

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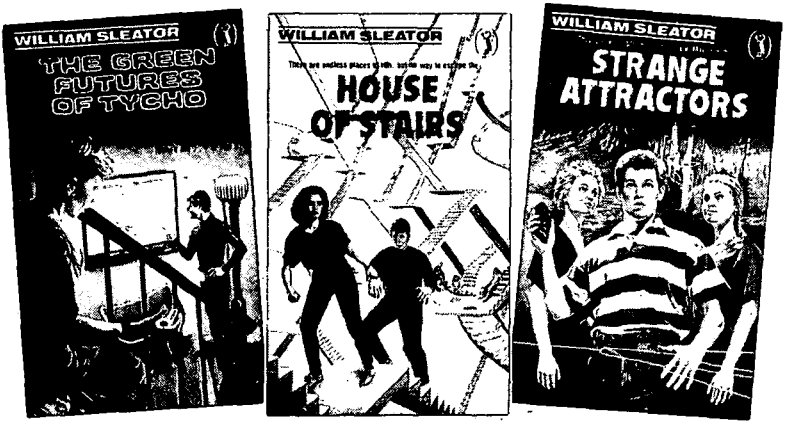

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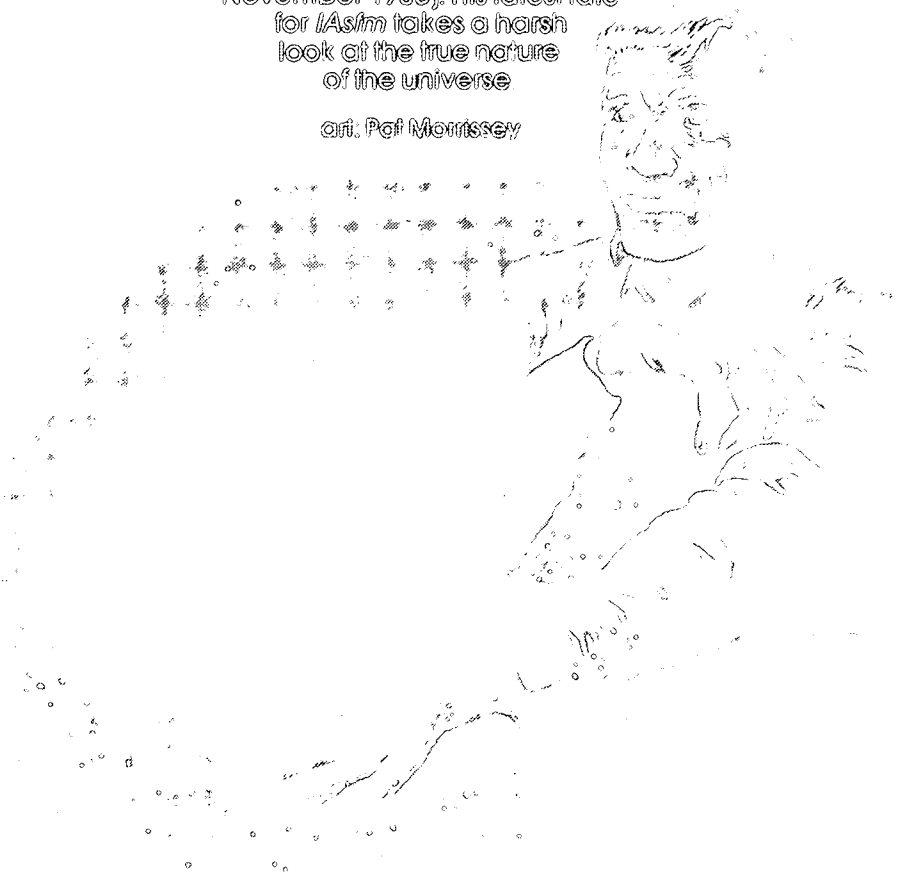
TYGER

by Jack McDevitt

Jack McDevitt is currently at work on his third novel, *Dawn Tracer*, an archaeological mystery that grows out of events described in his short story, "Melville or Iapetus" (*IAsfm*, November 1983). His latest tale for *IAsfm* takes a harsh look at the true nature of the universe

art: Pat Morrissey



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Did he smile his work to see?
—Blake

David was dead at last.

I will carry all my days the vision of Nick frozen against the sunlight while the wind blew the preacher's words across green fresh-cut grass.

The boy had never drawn a breath that was free of pain. He'd slipped away, almost unexpectedly, on the eve of his fifteenth birthday. "In God's hands," they murmured over the sound of the trees. "He's better off."

Afterward, Nick refused my offer that he stay with us a few days. I was uncomfortable at the prospect of my brother rolling around alone in his apartment. But he assured me he'd be all right, that there was enough going on at work to keep him engaged. "It's been coming a long time," he said, voice tight. And: "What I'm grateful for is, he never gave up. I don't think he ever believed it would actually happen."

I tried to stay in touch, but it was a busy time for me, and Nick wasn't very good at returning phone calls anyway. On the occasional evenings when my duties took me to the branch bank on Somerset, I made it a point to drive a few blocks out of my way, past his condo. It was on the rooftop of a squat five-story stone building. I stopped to talk to him only once, and he seemed so uncomfortable in my presence that I did not do so again. But I could see him moving around in there, backlit, staring out over the city.

If you've formed the judgment that I neglected him during this period, you are probably correct. In my defense, I should mention that Virginia delivered our second child two days after the funeral, and immediately fell ill. In addition, the markets went erratic, and I was literally working well into the evening on a regular basis trying to protect the bank's investments. So I forgot about Nick until Edward Cord called.

Cord was the director of the particle accelerator lab at the University of Washington, where Nick was a researcher. "Have you seen him recently?" he asked. "He's changed."

"He's still upset."

"He's changed. Talk to him. He needs you."

I couldn't get past his telephone answering system. Finally, disgusted, I got in my car early on a Friday evening, and drove over.

Lights were on in the penthouse condo, one in the den, one in back. I parked across the street, went into the lobby, and punched his button. Punched it again.

"Who's there?" The voice rasped. He sounded annoyed.

"Michael."

A long pause. Then the lock on the security door clicked.

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The elevator opened off the terrace, and he met me with drinks in his hand. The usual rum and Coke. "Michael," he said. "Good to see you." He managed a smile, but his eyes were bleak and wintry.

"How've you been, Nick?"

"Okay." It was an unseasonably warm evening in October. A quarter moon swam among wisps of cloud over the city. There was a taste of salt air off the Sound. "I take it you've been worried about me."

"A little."

"You have reason." We crossed the terrace and went into the apartment. A desk lamp dropped a pool of light onto a pile of notebooks and printouts. There was no other illumination in the room. "I'm sorry. I know I've been out of touch lately." He tried again for a smile. It wasn't there. "I've been busy."

"Cord called."

He nodded. "I'm not surprised."

Bookshelves lined the room. Beyond the pale cast of the lamp, the walls grew insubstantial, gave way to void. An X-ray photo of the Milky Way hung by the door, and several of Nick's awards were mounted near the fireplace. A couple of landscapes broke up the academic character of the room.

Framed photographs stood on the desk: Terri alive and happy against a clutch of blue sky, windblown hair sparkling in sunlight. And David: on his bike at about eight, and again two years later locked in the embrace of a Mariners outfielder who had heard about the case, and a third depicting him in a baseball cap standing between Nick and me. In all the pictures the child, like the mother, looked happy. In love with life.

"Nick, you can't mourn him forever."

He waved me onto the sofa and sat down in the big imitation leather wingback. "I won't live long enough to do that, will I, Michael?"

"You understand what I'm saying." I tried to keep the edge out of my voice.

He shrugged. Sipped his drink. It looked like wine. Chablis, probably. "It doesn't matter."

"Nick, we'd like to have you over for dinner. Maybe Sunday? Virginia would like to see you again."

He shook his head. "Thanks, Michael. But no. I'm not really able to do that." He took a deep breath. Straightened his sweater. "Maybe another time."

"Nick—"

"Please, Michael. We know each other too well, so I'll not lie to you. I have no interest just now in dinners and evenings out."

I waited until he could not misunderstand my dissatisfaction. "Is there anything we *can* do for you?"

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"No." He rose, expecting me to go.

"Nick," I said, composing myself more comfortably, "it's been six months. You need to get your life together again."

"Just soldier on," he said.

What the hell do you say in a situation like that? Everything sounds dumb. "I know it's hard. But these things happen. You have to be able—"

"They do *not,*" he snarled, "*happen.* Nothing simply *happens.*" He shook his head and his eyes slid shut. His lips trembled, and he fell silent.

The place was empty without David. Quiet. Not lifeless, because Nick possessed a relentless energy and vitality of his own. But it seemed as though direction had been lost. Point. The reason for it all.

"I'm sorry," I said.

I had drunk very little of the rum and Coke, certainly not enough to account for the subtle sense of disquiet that had settled about me. I don't know whether there was a modulation in his tone, or some curious juxtaposition of hand and shoulder, or a glint of terror reflected in glass. "No," he said quietly, "nothing happens save by design."

Curious remark: I had never known him to be religious. Our father had provided a religious education for both of us, but in Nick's case it had not taken.

His face twisted briefly. Grief. Rage. I couldn't tell. But in the end it settled into a hard smile. "Michael," he said, "what do you think lies behind the stars?"

I tried to penetrate his expression. To determine what he was really asking. "God," I said at last. "Or nothing."

His eyes locked with mine. "I quite agree," he said. And, after a long pause: "I believe we've found His footprints."

He smiled at my confusion. He leaned forward, and his voice gained intensity. "Michael, the universe is wired. The fix is in. David never had a chance. Nor do you. Nor I. From the very beginning—" He rose from his chair and strode toward one of the windows. Seattle glittered in the distance, an ocean of illuminated highways and buildings and bridges.

"Nick—"

"We've begun to understand how it was done. Michael, there's a complete set of instructions written into the post-quantum world, a concordance of particle harmonics, a manipulation of the more exotic dimensions. *Directions,* establishing the rules, setting the value of gravity, tuning the electroweak charge, establishing the Mannheim Complexity Principle. Ultimately writing the nature of Man. It's all going to be there, Michael. There's a lot we don't know yet. But *someone* wrote the program, Michael. The theologians were right all along—"

"This is old stuff, Nick," I said. "Railing at God when things go wrong."

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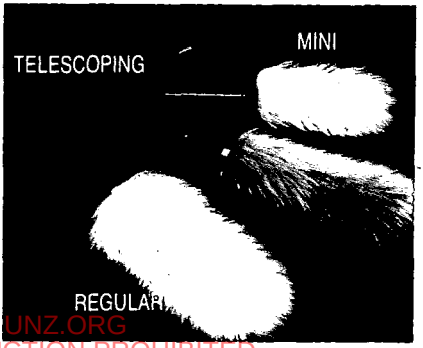

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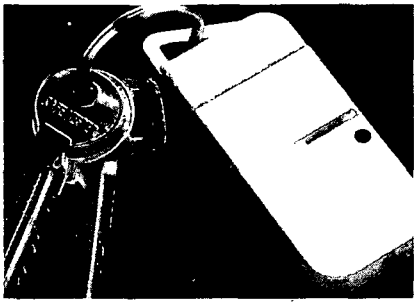

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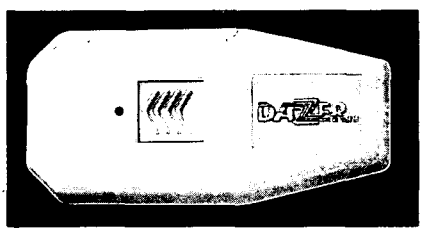

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"It comes with a twist now. We know how to *make* a universe. Were you aware of that?"

"No," I said. It was hard to tell whether he was mocking me, or delirious. In the uncertain light, I could not get a good look at his eyes. "I wasn't aware." And after a moment, "The idea is absurd."

"Nevertheless, it is quite true."

I sighed. "And how would we go about doing that?"

"Quite easily, Michael. We pack a relatively modest quantity of matter, a few kilograms, into a cramped space." He looked past me, toward the shadowy area where his bookshelves met the ceiling. "The space would have to be *quite* cramped, of course. It would be considerably smaller than an atomic nucleus. But after we've done it, we have a cosmic seed." He smiled. It was a distorted smile. Almost malevolent. "Then all you have to do is let go and stand back." His teeth gleamed.

"And you get a new big bang?"

"Theoretically. Yes."

I snorted. "Come on, Nick, a few kilograms wouldn't give you a good-sized *rock*."

He set his glass down and immediately picked it up again. His fingers curled around it, gripped it. "The seed is only a seed. It contains the trigger, and the plan. Once it explodes, the process takes on a life of its own. It creates what it needs. The forces come into existence, and the physical constants lock in. The clock begins to run."

"That doesn't make sense."

Nick smiled. "Nevertheless, it happens. It has *already* happened. If it hadn't, you and I wouldn't be standing here."

"You're saying *we* could do this?"

"No, Michael. We don't have the technology. *Yet*. I'm saying it *could* be done. Probably *has* been done."

Nick had brightened numerous evenings in the old days with quantum stories. We were a family of stockbrokers and financial experts. He used to come home and go on about objects that exist simultaneously in two places, or move backward in time, or wink in and out of existence. My father used to describe Nick's mind in much the same terms.

"All right," I said. "If you went out into your kitchen right now, and cooked one of these things up, what would happen to *us* when it let go?"

"Probably nothing. The blast would immediately form a new time-space continuum. The lights might dim a little. Maybe the room would even shake. But that would be about all."

I let him refill my glass. "Well," I said, "whatever." Even for Nick, that one was off the wall. "What has any of this got to do with—" I hesitated.

"—With David?"

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"Yes. No. I don't know. What connection has it with your burying yourself up here?"

His eyes were very round, and very hard. "Let me take you a step further, Michael. We've gone beyond the quantum world now. Anyone with the technology to cook up a new cosmos, as you so quaintly put it, would also be able to set the parameters for the universe that would result. In fact, they would almost certainly have to, or they'd get nothing more than cosmic sludge."

"Explain, please."

He leaped to his feet, knocked over a stack of books on an end table, and threw open the glass doors. The city lights blazed, presided over by the diaphanous quarter moon and the cold distant stars. "Unless you were *very* lucky, Michael—*incredibly* lucky—unless a world of constants balanced very precisely, and a multitude of physical laws came out just right, there would *be* no moon to adorn this sky, no suns to brighten the night. And certainly no eyes to see the difference." He strode out onto the terrace, and advanced toward the edge of the roof. Uncertain what he might do in his agitated state, I hurried after him. "*But,*" he continued, "with a little ingenuity, we can create whatever we wish. Flowers. Galaxies. An immortal race."

"He did not see fit to do that," I said firmly.

He swung round. "No. He did not." He raised his face to the stars. "Indeed, He did not. Certainly, He did not lack the imagination. Everything around us shows us that. But He chose to show us the possibilities of existence, to let us taste love, and to snatch it away. To create transients in this marvelous place. What are our lives, finally, but a long march toward a dusty end? Michael—" His eyes widened, and his voice rose to a shriek, "the stars were created not in love, but in malice. If you could create angels, would you make *men?*"

"That's not ours to judge," I said.

"Isn't it? You and I are the *victims,* Michael. If not us, then who?"

The wind blew across the rooftop.

"*Think,* Michael: what kind of being would give us *death* when He had *life* in His hands?"

The temperature was dropping. Lights moved against the stars, headed in the general direction of Seattle-Tacoma International. "*If* you're correct, Nick—and I say *if*—the kind of Deity you're describing might take offense." It was really an effort to lighten the mood. It didn't.

"Thunderbolt out of a clear sky? No: we are safely beyond His reach."

"How do you know?"

"Because once He released the cosmic seed, we expanded into another universe. He can't touch us. That's the way it works. We're alone, Michael. No need to worry." He began to giggle. The laughter bubbled out

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of his throat but stopped short when he rammed a fist into the waist-high brick wall at the edge of the roof.

I helped him back inside. The knuckles were scraped and bleeding. His hysteria drained, and I sat him down and got out the Mercurochrome. "I'm sorry," he said. "I really shouldn't have loaded all that on you."

"You're right." Our eyes met. "Nor on yourself."

A storm blew up out of the Pacific that night. It carried no rain, but there was electricity, and it dumped a lot of hail into the area. I lay awake through much of it, watching the light in the bedroom curtains alternately brighten and fade, listening to the rhythmic breathing of my wife. At one point I got up and wandered through the house, checking the kids.

And, for the first time in many years, I prayed. But the old words sounded empty.

I knew there was nothing to Nick's aberration. But I kept thinking: surely, a Technician who could wire gravity into the universe could manage a mechanism to dispose of malcontents. In spite of common sense, I was worried.

I called him in the morning, got no answer, waited an hour, and tried the lab. Cord picked up the phone. "Yes," he said. "He's here. Did you want to talk to him?"

"No," I said. "Is he okay?"

"Far as I can tell. Why? Did something happen?"

So there had been no bolts. Nothing had come in the night to carry him off.

Still, it's hard to get him out of that gloomy tower. Occasionally I can see him up there, framed in the light of that single lamp. Staring across the city. Across the world.

And it has occurred to me that there are subtler ways than lightning bolts. ●

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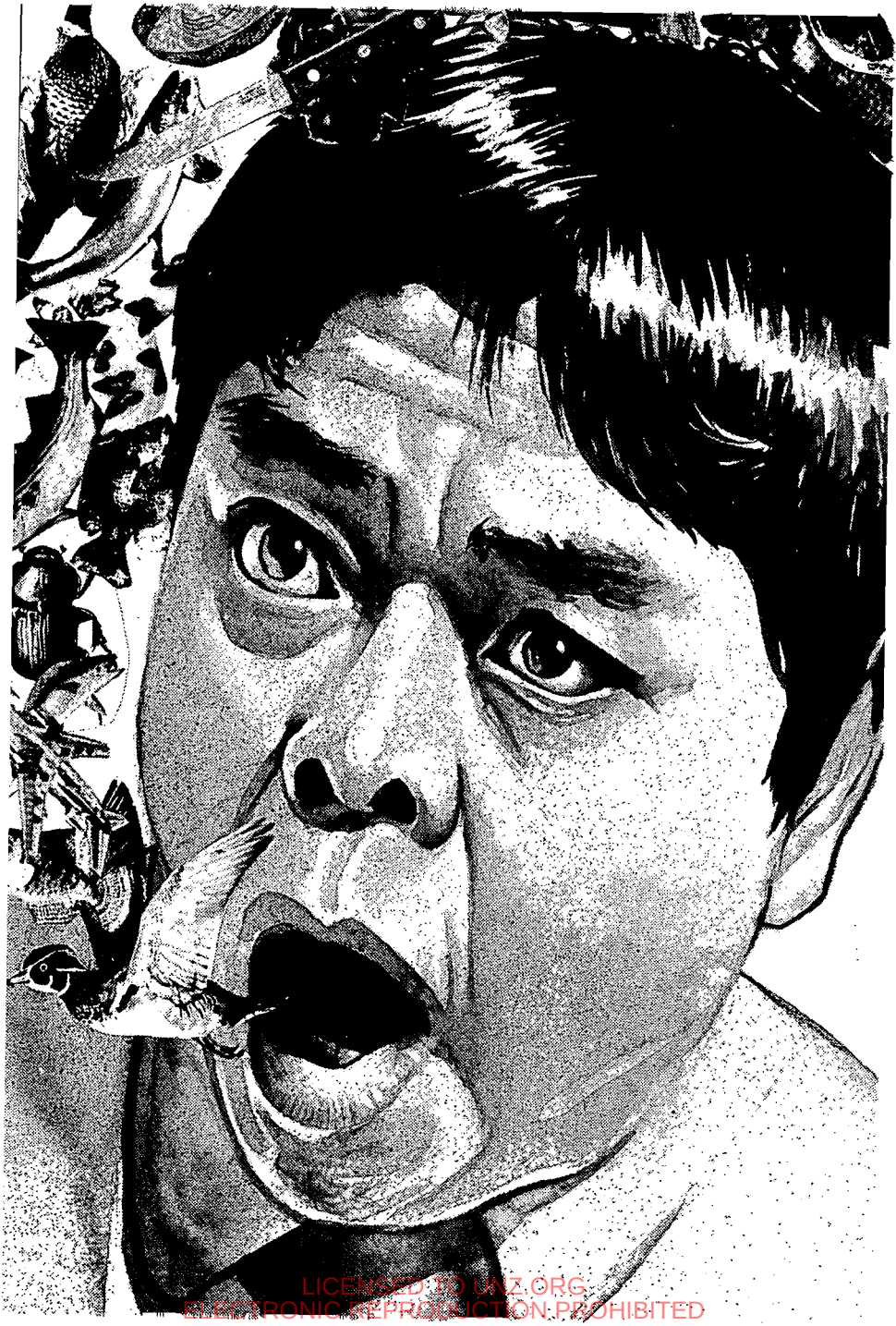

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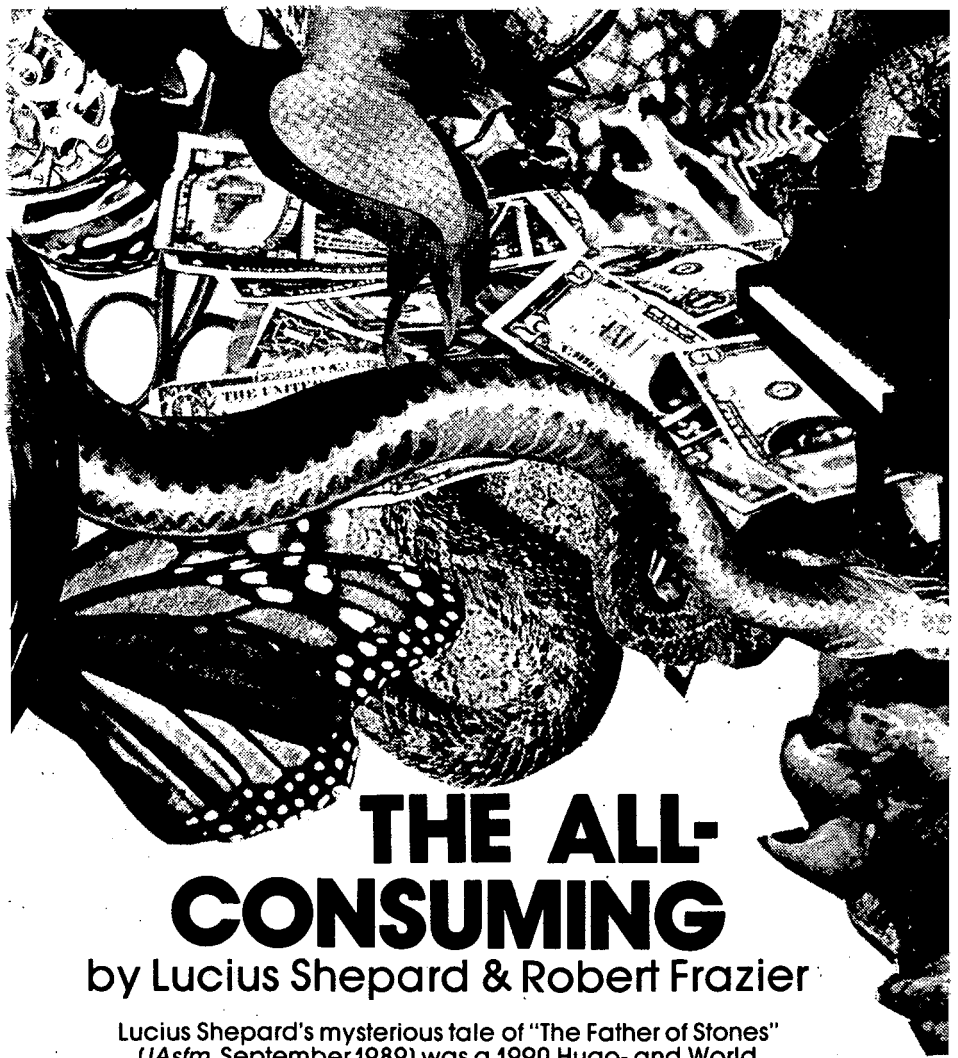

THE ALL-CONSUMING

by Lucius Shepard & Robert Frazier

Lucius Shepard's mysterious tale of "The Father of Stones" (*IAsfm*, September 1989) was a 1990 Hugo- and World Fantasy-Award finalist. Arkham House has just released Mr. Shepard's latest short story collection, *The Ends of the Earth*, and his new novel, *The Off-Season*, will be available soon from Ziesing.

IAsfm's prolific contributor of illuminating poetry, Robert Frazier, has also sold stories to *Amazing*, *New Pathways*, *Twilight Zone*, and *In the Field of Fire*. "The All-Consuming" is his third story to appear in *IAsfm*.

art: Laura Lakey

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Santander Jimenez was one of the towns that ringed the Malsueño, a kind of border station between the insane tangle of the rain forest and the more comprehensible and traditional insanity of the highlands. It was a miserable place of diesel smoke and rattling generators and concrete-block buildings painted in pastel shades of yellow, green and aqua, many with rusted Fanta signs over their doors, bearing names such as the Café of a Thousand Flowers or The Eternal Garden Bar or the Restaurant of Golden Desires, all containing fly-specked Formica tables and inefficient ceiling fans and fat women wearing grease-spattered aprons and discouraging frowns. Whores slouched beneath the buzzing neon marquee of the Cine Guevara. Drunks with bloody mouths lay in the puddles that mired the muddy streets. It was always raining. Even during the height of the dry season, the lake was so high that the playground beside it was half-submerged, presenting a surreal vista of drowned swing sets and seesaws.

To the west of town, separated from the other buildings by a wide ground strewn with coconut litter and flattened beer cans, stood a market—a vast tin roof shading a hive of green wooden stalls. It was there that the *marañeros* would take the curious relics and still more curious produce that they collected in the heart of the rain forest: stone idols whose eyes glowed with electric moss; albino beetles the size of house cats; jaguar bones inlaid with seams of mineral that flowed like mercury; lizards with voices as sweet as nightingales; mimick vines, parrot plants and pavonine, with its addictive spores that afforded one a transitory mental contact with the creatures of the jungle.

They were, for the most part, these *marañeros*, scrawny, rawboned men who wore brave tattoos that depicted lions and devils and laughing skulls. Their faces were scarred, disfigured by fungus and spirochetes, and when they walked out in the town, they were given a wide berth, not because of their appearance or their penchant for violence, which was no greater than that of the ordinary citizen, but because they embodied the dread mystique of the Malsueño, and in their tormented solitudes, they seemed the emblems of a death in life more frightening to the uninformed than the good Catholic death advertised by the portly priests at Santa Ana de la Flor del Piedra.

Scarcely anyone who lived in Santander Jimenez wanted to live there. A number of citizens had been driven to this extreme in order to hide from a criminal or politically unsound past. The most desperate of these were the *marañeros*—who but those who themselves were hunted would voluntarily enter the Malsueño to dwell for months at a time among tarzanals and blood vine and christomorphs?—and the most desperate of the *marañeros,* or so he had countenanced himself for twenty-one years, so many years that his desperation had mellowed to an agitated

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resignation, was a gaunt, graying man by the name of Arce Cienfuegos. In his youth, he had been an educator in the capital in the extreme west of the country, married to a beautiful woman, the father of an infant son, and had aspired to a career in politics. However, his overzealous pursuit of that career had set him at odds with the drug cartel; as a result, his wife and child had been murdered, a crime with which he had subsequently been charged, and he had been forced to flee to the Mälsueño. For a time thereafter, he had been driven by a lust for revenge, for vindication, but when at last the drug cartel had been shattered, its leaders executed, revenge was denied him, and because those who could prove his innocence were in their coffins, the murder charge against him had remained open. Now, at the age of forty-eight, his crime forgotten, although he might have returned to the capital, he was so defeated by time and solitude and grief he could no longer think of a reason to leave. Just as chemical pollutants and radiation had transformed the jungle into a habitat suitable to the most grotesque of creatures, living in the Malsueño had transformed him into a sour twist of a man who thrived on its green acids, its vegetable perversions, and he was no longer fit for life in the outside world. Or so he had convinced himself.

Nonetheless, he yearned for some indefinable improvement in his lot, and to ease this yearning, he had lately taken to penetrating ever more deeply into the Malsueño, to daring unknown territory, telling himself that perhaps in the depths of the jungle, he would find a form of contentment, but knowing to his soul that what he truly sought was release from an existence whose despair and spiritual malaise had come to outweigh any fleshly reward.

One day, toward the end of the rainy season, Arce received word that a man who had taken a room at the Hotel America 66, one Yuoki Akashini, had asked to see him. In general, visitors to Santander Jimenez were limited to scientists hunting specimens and the odd tourist gone astray, and since, according to his informant, Mr. Akashini fell into neither of those categories, Arce's curiosity was aroused. That evening, he presented himself at the hotel and informed the owner, Nacho Perez, a bulbous, officious man of fifty, that he had an appointment with the Japanese gentleman. Nacho—who earned the larger part of his living by selling relics purchased from the *marañeros* at swindler's prices—attempted to pry information concerning the appointment out of him; but Arce, who loathed the hotel owner, having been cheated by him on countless occasions, kept his own counsel. Before entering room 23, he poked his head in the door and saw a short, crewcut man in his early thirties standing by a cot, wearing gray trousers and a T-shirt. The man glowed with health and had the heavily developed arms and chest

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of a weight lifter. His smile was extraordinarily white and fixed and wide.

"*Señor* Cienfuegos? Ah, excellent!" he said, and made a polite bow. "Please . . . come in, come in."

The room, which reeked of disinfectant, was of green concrete block and, like a jail cell, contained one chair, one cot, one toilet. Cobwebs clotted the transom and light was provided by a naked bulb dangling from a ceiling fixture. Mr. Akashini offered Arce the chair and took a position by the door, hands clasped behind his back and legs apart, like a soldier standing at ease.

"I am told," he said, his voice hoarse, his tone clipped, almost as if in accusation, "you know the jungle well." He arched an eyebrow, lending an accent of inquiry to these words.

"Well enough, I suppose."

Mr. Akashini nodded and made a rumbling noise deep in his throat—a sign of approval, Arce thought.

"If you're considering a trip into the jungle," he said, crossing his legs, "I'd advise against it."

"I do not require a guide," said Mr. Akashini. "I want you to bring me food."

Arce was nonplused. "There's a restaurant downstairs."

Mr. Akashini stood blinking, as if absorbing this information, then threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "Very good! A restaurant downstairs!" He wiped his eyes. "You have mistaken my meaning. I want you to bring me food from the jungle. Here. This will help you understand."

He crossed to the cot, where a suitcase lay open, and removed from it a thick leather-bound album, which he handed to Arce. It contained photographs and newspaper clippings that featured shots of Mr. Akashini at dinner. The text of the majority of the clippings was in Japanese, but several were in Spanish, and it was apparent from these—which bestowed upon Mr. Akashini the title of The All-Consuming—and from the photographs that he was not eating ordinary food but objects of different sorts: automobiles, among them a Rolls-Royce Corniche; works of art, including several important expressionist canvases and a small bronze by Rodin; cultural artifacts of every variety, mostly American, ranging from items such as one of Elvis Presley's leather-and-rhinestone jump suits, a guitar played by Jimi Hendrix and Lee Harvey Oswald's Carcano rifle—obtained at "an absurd cost," according to Mr. Akashini—to the structure of the first McDonald's restaurant, a meal that, ground to a powder and mixed with gruel, had taken a year to complete. Arce did not understand what had compelled Mr. Akashini to enter upon this strange gourmandizing, but one thing was plain: The man was wealthy

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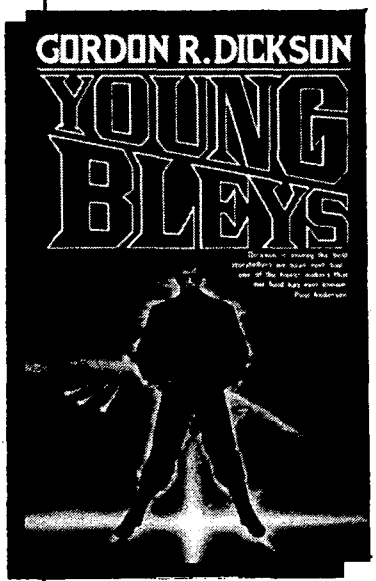

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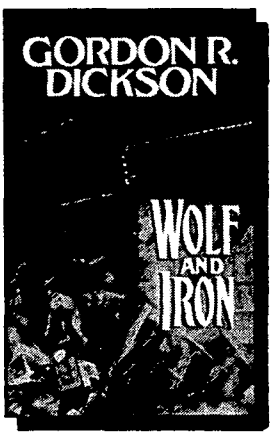

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beyond his wildest dreams, and although this did not overly excite Arce, for he had few wants, nevertheless, he was not one to let an opportunity for profit slip away.

"I am listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records,*" said Mr. Akashini proudly. "Three times." He held up three fingers in order to firmly imprint this fact on Arce's consciousness.

Arce tried to look impressed.

"I intend," Mr. Akashini went on, "to eat the Malsueño. Not everything in it, of course." He grinned and clapped Arce on the shoulder, as if to assure him of the limits of his appetite. "I wish to eat those things that will convey to me its essence. Things that embody the soul of the place."

"I see," said Arce, but failed to disguise the puzzlement in his voice.

"You are wondering, are you not," said Mr. Akashini, tipping his head to the side, holding up a forefinger like an earnest lecturer, "why I do this?"

"It's not my business."

"Still, you wonder." Mr. Akashini turned to the wall above his cot, again clasping his hands behind his back. He might have been standing on the bridge of a ship, considering a freshly conquered land. "I admit to a certain egocentric delight in accomplishment, but my desire to consume stems to a large degree from curiosity, from my love for other cultures, my desire to understand them. When I eat, you see, I understand. I cannot always express the understanding, but it is profound . . . more profound, I am convinced, than an understanding gained from study or travel or immersion in some facet of one culture or another. I know things about the United States that not even Americans know. I have tasted the inner mechanisms of American history, of the American experience. I have recently finished writing a book of meditations on the subject." He turned to Arce. "Now, it is my intention to understand the Malsueño, to derive from its mutations, from the furies of the radiation and chemicals and poisons that created them, a comprehension of its essence. So I have come to you for assistance. I will pay well."

He named a figure that elevated Arce's estimate of his wealth, and Arce signaled his acceptance.

"But how can you expect to eat poison and survive?" he asked.

"With caution." Mr. Akashini chuckled and patted his flat belly.

Arce pictured tiny cars, portraits, statuary, temples, entire civilizations in miniature inside Mr. Akashini's stomach, floating upon an angry sea like those depicted by the print maker Hokusai. The image infused the man's healthy glow with a decadent character.

"Please, have no fear about my capacity," said Mr. Akashini. "I am in excellent condition and accustomed to performing feats of ingestion. And

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I have implants that will neutralize those poisons that my system cannot handle. So, if you are agreed, I will expect my first meal tomorrow."

"I'll see to it," Arce came to his feet and, easing around Mr. Akashini, made for the door.

"Excuse, please!"

Arce turned and was met with a flash that blinded him for a moment; as his vision cleared, he saw his employer lowering a camera.

"See you at suppertime!" said Mr. Akashini.

He nodded and smiled as if he had already digested and understood everything there was to know about Arce.

Although determined to earn his fee, Arce did not intend to risk himself in the deep jungle for such a fool as Mr. Akashini appeared to be. Who did the man think he was to believe he could ingest the venomous essence of the Malsueño? Likely, he would be dead in a matter of days, however efficient his implants. And so the following afternoon, without bothering to put on protective gear, Arce walked a short distance into the jungle and cast about for something exotic and inedible . . . but nothing too virulent. He did not want to lose his patron so quickly. Soon he found an appropriate entree and secured it inside a specimen bag. At dusk, his find laid out in a box of transparent plastic with a small hinged opening, he presented himself at the hotel. Room 23 had undergone a few changes. The cot had been removed, and in its place was a narrow futon. Dominating the room, making it almost impossible to move, was a mahogany dinner table set with fine linens and silverware and adorned with a silver candelabrum. Mr. Akashini, attired in a dinner jacket and a black tie, was seated at the table, smiling his gleaming edifice of a smile.

"Ah!" he said. "And what do you have for me, *Señor* Cienfuegos?"

With a flourish, Arce deposited the box on the table and was rewarded by an appreciative sigh. In the dim light, his culinary offering—ordinary by the grotesque standards for the Malsueño—looked spectacularly mysterious: an eighteen-inch-long section of a rotten log, shining a vile, vivid green, with the swirls of phosphorescent fungus that nearly covered its dark, grooved surface; scuttling here and there were big spiders that showed a negative black against the green radiance, like intricate holes in a glowing film that was sliding back and forth . . . except now and again, they merged into a single many-legged blackness that pulsed and shimmered and grew larger still. Bathed in that glow, Mr. Akashini's face was etched into a masklike pattern of garish light and shadow.

"What are they?" he said, his eyes glued to the box.

For Mr. Akashini's benefit, Arce resorted to invention.

"They are among the great mysteries of the Malsueño," he said. "And thus, they have no name, for who can name the incomprehensible? They

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are insect absences, they live, they prey on life, and yet they are lightless and undefined, more nothing than something. They are common yet the essence of rarity. They are numberless, yet they are one."

At this, words failed him. He folded his arms and affected a solemn pose.

"Excellent!" whispered Mr. Akashini, leaning close to the lid of the box. He made one of his customary throaty growls. "You may leave now. I wish to eat alone so as to maximize my understanding."

That was agreeable to Arce, who had no wish to observe the fate of the spiders and the fungus-coated log. But as he turned to leave, pleased with the facility with which he had satisfied the terms of his employment, Mr. Akashini said, "You have provided me with a marvelous hors d'ouevre, *señor,* but I expect much more of you. Is that clear?"

"Of course," said Arce, startled.

"No, not of course. There is nothing of course about what I've asked of you. I expect diligence. And even more than diligence, I expect zeal."

"As you wish."

"Yes," said Mr. Akashini, fitting his gaze to the glowing feast, his face again ordered by that impenetrable smile. "Exactly."

Although for weeks he obeyed Mr. Akashini's instructions and sought out ever more exotic and deadly suppers, to Arce's surprise, his employer did not sicken and die but thrived on his diet of poisons and claws and spores. His healthy glow increased, his biceps bulged like cannon balls, his eyes remained clear. It became a challenge to Arce to locate a dish that would weaken Mr. Akashini's resistance, that would at least cause him an upset stomach. He did not care for Mr. Akashini and had concluded that the man was something more sinister than a fool. And when Nacho asked again what was the nature of his business in room 23, Arce had no qualms about telling him, thinking that Nacho would make a joke of his employer's diet. But Nacho was incredulous and shook his fist at Arce. "I'm warning you," he said. "I won't have you taking advantage of my guests."

Arce understood that Nacho was concerned that he might be swindling Mr. Akashini and not cutting him in for a percentage. When he tried to clarify the matter, Nacho only threatened him again, demanded money, and Arce walked away in disgust.

It was evident by the way Mr. Akashini used his camera that he had no regard for anyone in the town. He would approach potential subjects, all smiles and bows, and proceed to pose them, making it plain that he was ridiculing the person whose photograph he was preparing to take. He posed confused, dignified old men with bouquets of flowers, he posed Nacho with a toy machine gun, he posed a young girl with an ugly

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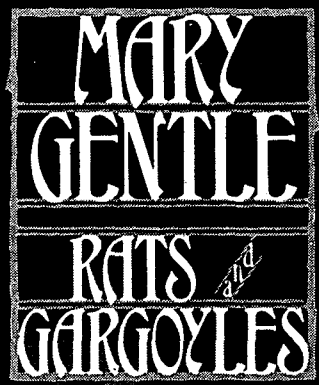

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birthmark on her cheek holding an armful of puppies. Afterward, he would once again smile and bow, but the smiles were sneers and the bows were slaps. Arce understood the uses of contempt—he had witnessed it among his own people in their harsh attitude toward Americans. Yet they were expressing the classic resentment of the poor toward the wealthy, and he could not fathom why Mr. Akashini, who was wealthier than an American, should express a similar attitude toward the poor. Perhaps, he thought, Mr. Akashini had himself been poor and was now having his revenge. But why revenge himself upon those who had never lorded it over him? Was his need to understand, to consume, part and parcel of a need to dominate and deride? All Arce knew of Japan had been gleaned from books dealing with the samurai, with knights, swords and a chill formal morality, and he had the notion that the values detailed in these books were of moment to Mr. Akashini, though in some distorted fashion. Yet, in the end, he could not decide if Mr. Akashini were as simple as he appeared or if there were more to him than met the eye, and he thought this might be a question to which not even his employer knew the answer.

Be he complicated or simple, one thing was apparent—Mr. Akashini did not know as much as he pretended. He could spout volumes of facts concerning the Malsueño. Yet his knowledge lacked the depth of experience, the unifying character of something known in the heart of the mind, and Arce could not accept the idea that consumption bestowed upon him a deeper comprehension. The things he claimed to understand of America—rock-and-roll music, say—he understood in a Japanese way, imbuing them with watered-down samurai principles and a neon romanticism redolent of contemporary Tokyo night-club values and B movies, thereby transforming them into devalued icons that bore little relation to the realities from which they had sprung.

However, Arce was not such a fool that he claimed to understand Mr. Akashini, and putting his doubts aside, he made an interior renewal of his contract and set himself to feed Mr. Akashini the absolute essence of the Malsueño, hoping to either prove or disprove the thesis. He was beginning to feel an odd responsibility to his job, to a man who—though he paid well—had shown him nothing but contempt, and while this conscientious behavior troubled him, being out of character with the person he believed he had become, he had no choice but to obey its imperatives.

Arce's searches carried him farther and farther afield and one morning found him in a clearing three days' trek from Santander Jimenez. Mr. Akashini would be occupied for the better part of a week in devouring his latest offering, which included lapis bees and lime ants, a section from the trunk of a gargantua garnished with its thorns, an entire duende

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cooked with blood vine, various fungi, all seasoned with powder ground from woohli bones and served with a variety of mushrooms. Thus, Arce, being in no particular hurry, stopped to rest and enjoy the otherworldly beauty of the clearing, its foliage a mingling of mineral brilliance and fairy shape such as occurred only within the confines of the Malsueño.

At the center of the clearing was a cloud pool, a ragged oval some twelve feet in diameter, whose quicksilver surface mirrored the surrounding foliage—yellow weeds; boulders furred with orange moss; mushrooms the size of parasols, their purple crowns mottled with spots of vermilion; mattes of dead lianas thick as boas; shrubs with spine-tipped viridian leaves that quested ceaselessly for some animal presence in which to inject their venom; and, dangling from above, the immense red leaves of a gargantua, each large enough to wrap about oneself several times.

Through the gaps in the foliage, Arce could see the slender trunks of other gargantuas rising above the canopy, vanishing into a bank of low clouds. And in the middle distance, its translucent flesh barely visible against the overcast, a rainbird flapped up from a stinger palm and beat its way south against the prevailing wind. Arce watched it out of sight, captivated by the almost impalpable vibration of its wings, by the entirety of the scene, with its gaudy array of colors and exotic vitality. At times like this, he was able to shrug off the bitter weight of his past for a few moments and delight in the mystery he inhabited.

Once he had carefully inspected the area, he settled on a boulder and opened the face plate of his protective suit. The heat was oppressive after the coolness of the suit, and the air stank of carrion and sweet rot, yet it was refreshing to feel the breeze on his face. He took a packet of dried fruit from a pocket on his sleeve and ate, ever aware of the rustlings and cries and movement about him—there were creatures in this part of the jungle that could pluck him from his suit with no more difficulty than a man shelling a peanut, and they were not always easy to detect. Absently, he tossed a piece of apricot into the cloud pool and watched the silvery surface effloresce as it digested the fruit, ruffles of milky rose and lavender spreading from the point of impact toward the edges like the opening of a convulsed bloom. He considered collecting a vial of the fluid for Mr. Akashini—that would test the efficacy of his implants.

Yet to Arce's mind, the cloud pool did not emobody the essence of the jungle but rather was a filigree, an adornment, and he doubted that he could provide his employer with any more quintessentially Malsuenan a meal than some of those he had already served him. Mr. Akashini had eaten fillet of tarzanal, woohli, ghost lemur, jaguar, malcoton; he had supped on stews of tar fish, manta bat, pezmiel, manatee; he had consumed stone, leaf, root, spore; he had gorged himself on sauces com-

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pounded of poison, feces, animal and plant excrescence of every kind; yet he appeared as healthy and ignorant as before. What, Arce thought, if it were the very efficacy of his implants that kept him from true understanding? Perhaps to attain such a state, one must be vulnerable to that which one wished to understand.

He unzipped another pocket on his sleeve and removed a packet of pavonine spores. Arce was no addict, but he enjoyed a taste of the drug now and again, and when attempting to seek out certain animals, he found it more than a little useful. He touched a spore-covered finger tip to his tongue, enough to sensitize him to his immediate environment. Within seconds, he felt a tightening at the back of his throat, a queasiness and a touch of vertigo. A violent cramp doubled him over, bringing tears and spots before his eyes. By the time the cramp had passed, he seemed to be crawling along a high branch of a gargantua, hauling himself along with knobby, hairy fingers tipped with claws, pushing aside heavy folds of dangling leaves with ropy patterns of veins, inflamed by a dark-red emotion that sharpened into lust as he was being lifted, shaken, pincers locked about his chitinous body and, above him, impossibly tall pale arcs of grass blades and the glowing white blur of an orchid sun; and then, fat with blood, he hung dazed and languorous in a shadowy place; and then he was leaping, his jaws wide, claws straining toward the flanks of a fleeing tapir; and then his mind went blank and still and calm, like a pool of emerald water steeped in a single thought; and then, his shadow casting a lake of darkness across a thicket of sapodilla bushes, he roared, on fire with the ecstasy of his strength and the exuberance of his appetites.

Less than three minutes after he had taken the pavonine, Arce came unsteadily to his feet and started hunting for the calm green mind that his mind had touched . . . like nothing he had touched before. Calm, and yet a calm compounded of a trillion minute violences, like the jungle itself in the hour before first light, brimming with hot potentials, but, for the moment, cool and peaceful and hushed. Whatever it had been was close by the pool, Arce was certain, and so he knew it could be nothing large. He overturned rocks with the toe of his boot, probed in the weeds with a rotten stick and at length unearthed a smallish snake with an intricate pattern of red and yellow and white tattooed across its black scales. It slithered away but did so with no particular haste, as if—rather than trying to elude capture—it was simply going on its way, and when Arce netted it, instead of twisting and humping about, it coiled up and went to sleep. Seeing this, Arce did not doubt that the snake's skull housed the mind he had contacted, and although he had no real feeling that the snake would implement Mr. Akashini's understanding, still he was pleased to have found something new and surprising to feed him.

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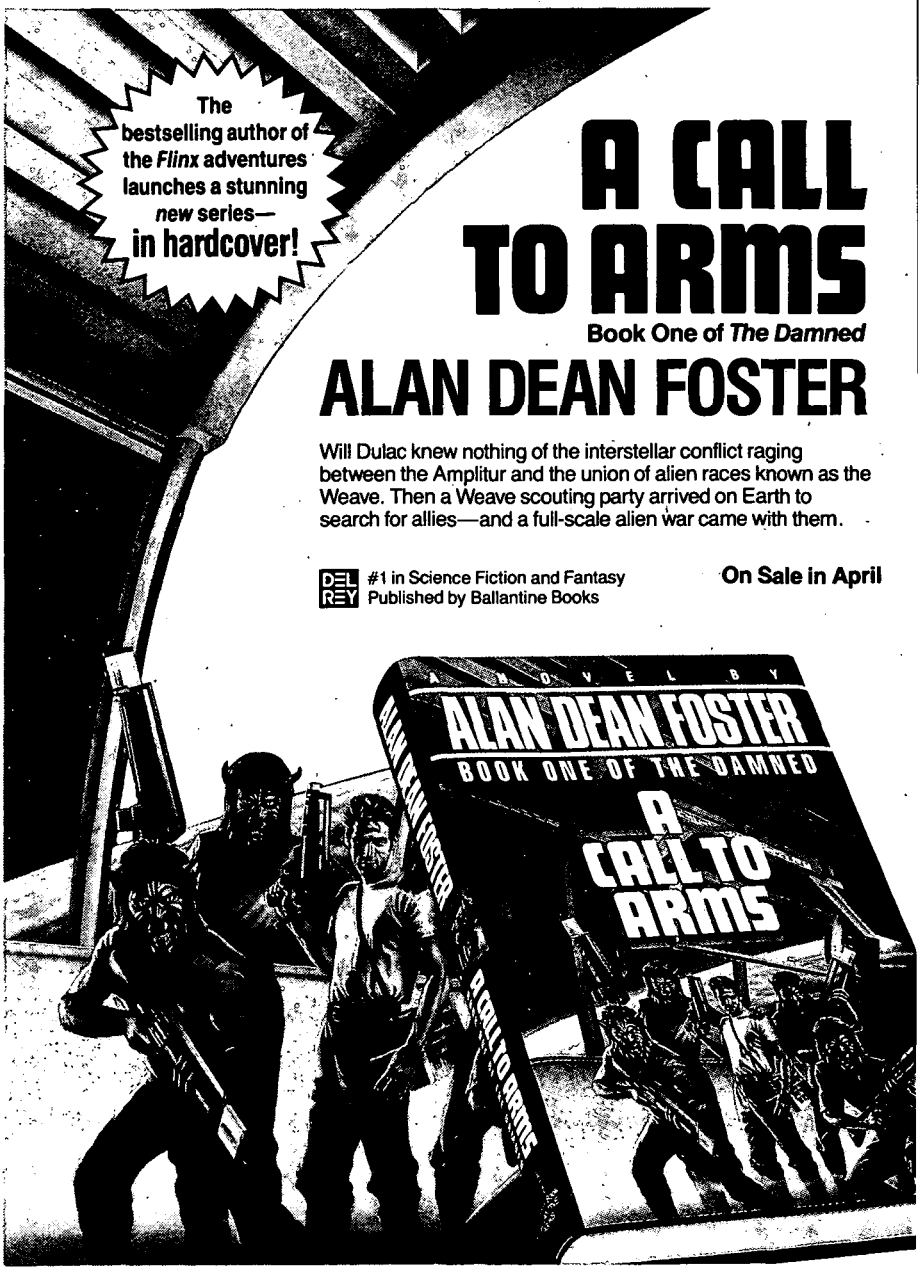

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* * *

On his return to Santander Jimenez, he served Mr. Akashini a meal that included a palm salad with diced snake meat. Then, leaving him to dine alone, he walked across town to the Salon Tiá Flaca, a rambling three-story building of dark-green boards close to the market, and there secured the companionship of a whore for the night. The whore, his favorite, was named Expectación and was a young thing, nineteen or twenty, pretty after the fashion of the women of the coast, slim and dark, with full breasts and a petulant mouth and black hair that tumbled like smoke about her shoulders. Once they had made love, she brought Arce rum with ice and lime and lay beside him and asked questions about his life whose answers were of no interest to her whatsoever. Arce realized that her curiosity was a charade, that she was merely fulfilling the forms of their unwritten contract, but nevertheless, he felt compelled to tell her about Mr. Akashini and the peculiar business between them, because by so doing, he hoped to disclose a pattern underlying it, something that would explain his new sense of responsibility, his complicity in this foolhardy mission.

When he was done, she propped herself up on an elbow, her pupils cored with orange reflections from the kerosene lamp, and said, "He pays you so much, and still you remain in Santander Jimenez?"

"It's as I've told you . . . I'm as happy here as anywhere. I've nowhere to go."

"Nowhere! You must be crazy! This"—she waved at the window, at the dark wall of the jungle beyond and the malfunctioning neons of the muddy little town—"*This* is nowhere! Even money can't change that. But the capital . . . with money. That's a different story."

"You're young," he said. "You don't understand."

She laughed. "The only way you can understand anything is to do it. . . . Then it's not worth talking about. Tell that to your Japanese man. Anyway, you're the one who doesn't understand." She threw her arms about him, her breasts flattening against his chest. "Let's get out of here, let's steal the Jap's money and go to the capital. Even if the theft is reported, the police there don't care what happens in the Malsueño. You know that's true. They'll just file the report. Come on, *Papá!* I swear I'll make you happy."

Arce was put off by her use of the word *papá,* and said, "Do you think I'm a fool? In the capital, the minute I turned my back, you'd be off with the first good-looking boy who caught your eye."

"You are a fool to think I'm just a slut." She drew back and seemed to be searching his face. "I've been a whore since I was twelve, and I've learned all I need to know about good-looking boys. What gets my heart racing is somebody like you. Somebody rich and refined who'll keep me

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safe. I'd marry a guy like you in a flash. But even if I was the kind of woman you say, no injury I did you would be worse than what you're doing to yourself by staying here."

He thought he detected in her eyes a flicker of something more than reflected light, of an inner luminescence like that found in the eyes of a malcoton. It occurred to him that she herself was of the Malsueño, one of its creatures, the calm green habit of her thoughts every bit as inexplicable to him as the mind of the snake he had captured. And yet there was something in her that brought back memories of his dead wife—a mixture of energy and toughness that tempted him to believe not only in her but in himself, in the possibility that he could regain his energy and hope.

"Maybe someday," he told her. "I'll think about it."

"Don't kid yourself, *Papá*. I don't think it's in you." She arched her back, and her breasts rolled on her chest, drawing his eyes to the stiffened chocolate-colored nipples. "I guess you were born to be a *marañero*. But at least you've got good taste in whores."

She went astride him and made love to him with more enthusiasm than before, and as he arched beneath her, watching her in the dim light that penetrated the fall of her hair, which hung down about his head, walling him into a place of warm breath and musk, he imagined that he knew her, that he could see past the deceits and counterfeits in her rapt features to a place where she was in love not with him but with the security offered by his circumstance. Not truly in love but—like a beast that has spotted its prey—in the grip of a fierce opportunism, a feeling that might as well have been love for its delirium and consuming intensity.

The next day, when Arce visited the hotel, Nacho Perez, dressed in a sweatstained *guayabera* and shorts, questioned him about his activities in room 23.

"What's going on up there?" he asked, mopping perspiration from his brow. "I won't have any funny business. Is he a drug addict? A pervert? What are you doing with him? He never lets anyone in the room, not even the maid. I won't tolerate this kind of behavior."

"You'll tolerate anything, Nacho," said Arce, "as long as you're paid to tolerate it. Ask your questions of Akashini."

"Listen to me . . ." Nacho began, but Arce caught him by the shirt front and said, "You bastard! Give me a reason—not a good reason, just a little one—and I'll cut you, do you hear?"

Nacho licked his lips and said, "I hear," but there was no conviction in his voice.

On reaching the room, Arce discovered that Mr. Akashini had spent

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a sleepless night. His color was poor, his brow clammy, his hands trembling. Yet when Arce suggested that he forego his meal, the Japanese man said, "No, no! I'm all right." He passed a handkerchief across his brow. "Perhaps something simple. A few plants . . . some insects." Arce had no choice but to comply, and for several days thereafter, he served Mr. Akashini harmless meals from the edge of the jungle; yet despite this, whether because of the snake or simply because of a surfeit of poisons that had neutralized his implants, Mr. Akashini continued to deteriorate. His skin acquired the unhealthy shine of milk spore, his eyes were clouded, his manner distracted, and he grew so weak that it took him three tries to heave himself up from his chair. Nothing Arce said would sway him from his course.

"I feel"—Mr. Akashini had to swallow—"I feel as if I am . . . close to something."

Close to death, was Arce's thought, but it was not his place to argue, and he only shrugged.

"Yes," said Mr. Akashini, as if answering a question inaudible to Arce. He ran a palsied hand along the linen tablecloth, which—like its owner—displayed the effects of ill usage: stains, rips, embroideries of mildew. Even the candelabrum seemed afflicted, its surface tarnished. On a chipped plate were the remains of a meal: philosopher beetles thrashing in a stew of weeds and wild dog. "I . . . uh . . ." Mr. Akashini's eyelids fluttered down and he gestured feebly at the plate. "Stay with me while I finish, will you?"

Astonished at this breach of custom, for Mr. Akashini had never before permitted him to remain with him while he ate, Arce took a seat on the futon and watched in silence as his employer laboriously swallowed down the stew. At last, he fell back in his chair, the muscles bunching in his jaw . . . or so Arce thought at first, his vision limited by the flickering candlelight. But then, to his horror, he realized that this was no simple muscular action. It appeared that a lump was moving beneath Mr. Akashini's skin, crawling crabwise across the cheek, along the cheekbone, then down along the hinge of the jaw and onto the neck, where it vanished as if submerging into the flesh. However, the truly horrifying aspect of this passage was that in its wake, the skin was suffused with blood, darkened, and the lump of muscle left—as a receding tide might reveal the configuration of the sand beneath—an expression such as Arce had never seen on any human face, one that seemed a rendering in human musculature of an emotion too poignant for such a canvas, embodying something of lust and fear but mostly a kind of feral longing. The expression faded, and Mr. Akashini, who had not moved for several minutes, his mouth wide open, let out a gurgling breath.

Certain that he was dead, Arce leaned over him and was further hor-

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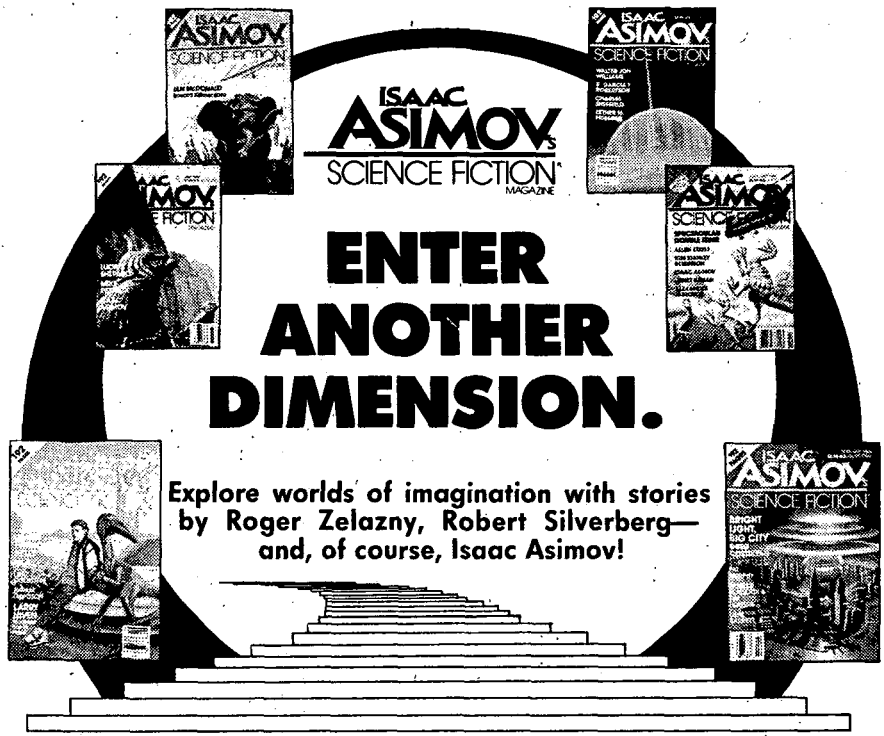
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rified to notice that the man's arms were freckled with vaguely phosphorescent patches of gray fungus. Closer inspection revealed other anomalies: three fingernails blackened and thick like chitin; strange whitish growths, like tiny outcroppings of crystal, inside the mouth; a cobweb of almost infinitesimally fine strands spanning the right eye. Arce's thoughts alternated between guilt and fear of implication in the death, but before he could decide how to proceed, Mr. Akashini stirred, giving him a start.

"I really believe that I am making progress," Mr. Akashini said with surprising vigor, and gave an approving growl.

Arce was inclined to let Mr. Akashini have his illusion, but a reflex of morality inspired him to say, "I think you're dying."

Mr. Akashini was silent for a long time. Finally, he said, "That is not important. I am making progress, nonetheless."

This confused Arce, causing him to wonder whether or not he had misjudged Mr. Akashini by labeling him a fool. But then he thought that his original judgment may have been correct, and that Mr. Akashini's judgment concerning his own enthusiasm must have been in error. Arce felt sympathy for him, and yet, contrasting Mr. Akashini's attitude with his own detachment, he envied him the rigor of his commitment.

"Will you continue to help me?" Mr. Akashini asked, and Arce, suddenly infected with a desire to know his employer, to comprehend the obscure drives that motivated him, could only say yes.

Mr. Akashini nodded toward his suitcase, which lay closed on the futon. "There . . . look beneath the clothing."

In the suitcase was a fat sheaf of traveler's checks. Arce handed them to Mr. Akashini, who—barely able to hold the pen—began endorsing them, saying, "You must keep them away from me . . . the people who would report my condition. Someone tries the door when you are away. I want nothing to interfere with . . . with what is happening."

Considering Nacho's suspicious questions and avaricious nature, Arce knew that Mr. Akashini's worries were well founded, yet he could not understand why his employer trusted him with such a vast sum of money. When he asked why, Mr. Akashini replied that he had no choice.

"Besides," he said, "you will not betray me. You have changed as much as I these past months, but one thing has not changed—you're an honest man, though you may not want to admit it."

Arce, convinced that because of his proximity to death, Mr. Akashini might have clearer sight than ordinary folk, asked how he had changed, but his employer had fallen asleep. Watching him, Arce thought it might be possible for him to know Mr. Akashini, and that they might have been friends, though only for a brief period. If they were both changing—and he believed they were, for he sensed change in himself the way

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he sometimes sensed the presence of a lurking animal in a shadowy thicket—then they were changing in different directions, and in passing, they were likely to experience a momentary compatibility at best.

Unable to care for Mr. Akashini every hour of the day, Arce recruited Expectación to assist him, bestowing trust upon her with the same hopeful conviction with which Mr. Akashini had bestowed it upon him. Yet he was not so thoroughly trusting as his employer. When forced to be away from the room, he would leave valuables tucked into places where a cursory search would reveal them. Not once did he discover anything missing, and he took this for an emblem not of trustworthiness—he believed Expectación had made a search—but of wisdom. He understood that she was interested less in making a minor profit than in changing her life, and since wisdom was an ultimately more reliable virtue than trustworthiness, he came to value her more and more, to dote upon the sweetness of her body and the bright particularity of her soul.

Yet as they watched Mr. Akashini being transformed into the artifact of his understanding, a strong bond developed between them, one that stopped short of untrustworthy passion and yet had many of the dependable consolations of love. It would have been unnatural had they not developed such a bond, because the event to which they were bearing witness was so monstrous it enforced union. Within the space of a few weeks, fungi of various sorts grew to cover much of Mr. Akashini's body, creating whorls of multicolored fur—saffron, lavender, and gray. His visible skin became pale and puffy, prone to odd shiftings and spasms, and his right eye was totally obscured by glowing silver webs and green spiders scarcely bigger than pinheads. More cobwebs spanned between his shoulders and neck and the walls, and a bubbled milky film coated his tongue, until finally, he had undergone a metamorphosis into a fearsome creature whose eyes glowed silver with greeny speckles in the darkened room, burning out from a head shaped like a tuber, his body sheathed in a mummy wrapping of cobwebs and moss, with stalks of mustard-colored fungi clumped like tiny cities here and there, a thing capable only of emitting croaked entreaties for food or asking that a photograph be taken. On one occasion, however, he appeared to regain something of his old spirit and strength and engaged Arce and Expectación in conversation.

"You must not be concerned, my friends," he said. "This is glorious."

The effect of his lips, almost sealed with clots of fungus, splitting and the effortfully spoken words oozing forth, struck Arce as being more ghastly than glorious, but he refrained from saying as much.

"Why does it seem glorious?" he asked.

Mr. Akashini made a noise that approximated laughter, the heaving

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of his chest and diaphragm causing puffs of dusty spores to spurt into the air. The candle flames flickered; a faint tide of shadow lapped up his legs, then receded. "I . . ." he said. "I am . . . becoming."

Expectación asked in a tremulous voice if he wanted water, and he turned his head toward her—the laborious motion of a statue coming to life after a centuries-long enchantment.

"Sitting here," he said, ignoring her question, "I am arrowing toward completion. Toward . . . everything I wanted to believe but never could. I understand. . . ."

"The Malsueño?" Arce asked. "You understand the Malsueño?"

"Not yet" was the answer. "I understand . . . not everything. But I had no understanding of anything before."

He appeared to drift off for a moment.

"What's happening to you?" Expectación asked him.

"When I was young," he said. "I dreamed of becoming a samurai . . ."

He gave another horrid laugh.

Expectación looked perplexed, and Arce wondered if his employer were rambling as men would in the grip of fever; yet he could not quite believe that. He sensed a new rectitude in Mr. Akashini, one that accorded with the ideas about Japan he had gleaned from his reading. But neither could he accept that what he sensed was wholly accurate, because Mr. Akashini's horrifying appearance seemed to put the lie to the notion of beneficent change.

In that stomach where once he had envisioned cars and paintings and other oddments of culture, he now pictured a miniature jungle, and sometimes, on entering the room from the bright corridor, he would think that a demon with eyes of unreal fire had materialized in Mr. Akashini's chair. He and Expectación spent hours on end sitting side by side, listening to the creaky whisperings of new growth emanating from the man's flesh, gazing at the awful pulsings of his chest and belly. Mr. Akashini was so self-involved that they were not embarrassed about making love in the room. Sex acted to diminish the miserable miracle before them and to make their vigil more tolerable, and if it had not been for Nacho's questions, knockings on the door and general harassment, they might have been happy.

Early one morning, before dawn, Arce went to buy breakfast for himself and Expectación—they had slept poorly, disturbed by the noises of Mr. Akashini's body and his constant troubled movement. On returning, he heard angry voices issuing from room 23. The bulbous form of Nacho Perez was blocking the door. He was haranguing Expectación, while two men—*marañeros,* judging by their tattos—searched the suitcases, doing their utmost to avoid contact with Mr. Akashini, who sat motionless,

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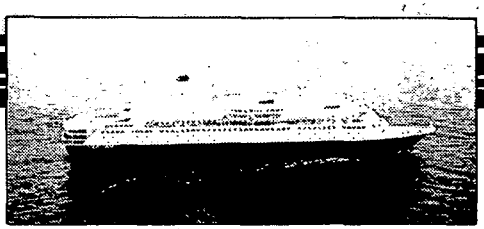

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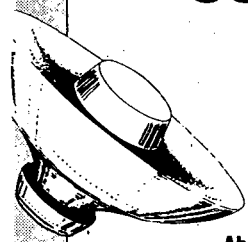

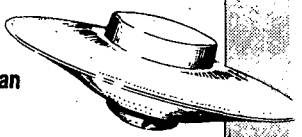

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emitting a faint buzzing, shifting now and again amid the fetters of his cobwebs, the shifts redolent not so much of muscular contractions as of vegetable reflex. In the dimness, due to the activity of microscopic spores, his glowing eyes appeared to be revolving slowly.

Arce drew his knife, but Nacho caught sight of him, seized Expectación and barred an arm beneath her chin.

"I'll break her neck!" he said.

Expectación threw herself about, trying to kick him, but when Nacho tightened his grip, she gave up struggling, other than to pluck feebly at his arm. Behind him, the two *marañeros* had drawn their knives. Arce recognized one of them—Gilberto Viera, a thin, sallow man with pocked skin and a pencil-line mustache.

"Gilberto," said Arce, "you remember the time on the Blanco Ojo? I helped you then. Help me now."

Gilberto looked ashamed but only lowered his eyes. The other man—taller, darker, with the nappy hair of a man born in the eastern mountains—asked Nacho, "What should we do?"

"Well," said Nacho, beaming at Arce, "that depends on our friend here."

"What do you want?" Arce had to exert tremendous restraint to resist aiming a slash at Nacho's double chin.

"There must be something," said Nacho archly, paying no attention to an intensification of Mr. Akashini's buzzing. "Isn't there, Arce?"

When Arce remained silent, he tightened his grip—Expectación's feet were lifted off the ground and her face grew dark with blood. She dug her nails into Nacho's arm but with no effect.

"There's some money hidden behind one of the bricks," Arce said grudgingly. "Let her go."

Another flurry of buzzing from Mr. Akashini, accompanied by a series of throaty clicks, as if he were trying to speak. The two *marañeros* edged away from his chair, bumping against Nacho.

"Which brick is it?" Nacho asked, and Arce, thinking furiously of how he might extricate Expectación from the fat man's grasp, was about to tell him, when—with the ponderous motion of a bloom bursting from its husk—Mr. Akashini came to his feet. With his glowing eyes and dark, deformed body, puffy strips of pallid skin showing through the fungus and moss like bandages, he was a gruesome sight. Gilberto tried to shove Nacho aside in an attempt to escape from the room. However, the other man spun about and slashed Mr. Akashini with his knife.

The knife passed through Mr. Akashini's side, its arc slowing as if encountering resistance of the sort that might be offered by sludge or mud; the dark fluid that leaked forth flowed with the sluggishness of syrup. Mr. Akashini staggered against the wall; his buzzing and clicking reached furious proportions, sounding like a nest of bees and crabs to-

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gether. A tiny spider scuttled out from his right eye, diminishing its glow by a speck of green. His cheek bulged. One arm began to vibrate, his skin bubbled up in places, his chest puffed and deflated as if responding to the workings of an enormous flabby heart. Arce was repelled and retreated along the corridor, but when Mr. Akashini gave out a growly hum—of satisfaction, Arce thought—he realized that some fraction of his employer's personality was yet embedded within this vegetable demon. The man who had wielded the knife shrieked, and Nacho half-turned to see what had gone wrong, blocking the doorway entirely. Arce seized the opportunity to leap forward and stab him low in the back. The hotel owner squealed, clutching at the wound, and released Expectación, who slumped to the floor and crawled away. Arce prepared to strike a second time, but the hotel owner lurched to the side, permitting him an unimpeded view into the room, and what he saw caused him to hesitate, allowing Nacho to stumble out of range.

Clouds of spores were pouring up from Mr. Akashini, filling the air with a whirling gray powder that reduced the flames of the candelabrum to pale yellow gleams, like golden tears hanging in the murk, and reduced the figures of the two *marañeros* to dimly perceived bulks that kicked and shuddered. One—Arce could not tell which—collapsed on the futon and the other crumpled beneath the dining table, both holding their throats and choking. Looming above them was Mr. Akashini, his luminous eyes the brightest objects in the room, the outline of his body nearly indistinguishable from the agitated gray motes around him, looking as ominous and eerie as a Fate. There was a flurrying at the edges of the body, along with a rustling sound—a horde of winged things were developing from the frays of skin, fluttering up to add a new density to the whirling spores, darkening the air further. Several danced out through the door; big carrion moths with charcoal wings. He must have inadvertently fed Mr. Akashini some of their eggs, Arce thought, and now they were hatching. And more than spores and moths were being born. Spiders, centipedes, insects of a hundred varieties were burrowing up through his skin, pustules opening to reveal the heads of infant snakes and baby beetles, bulges erupting into larval flows, as the process of Mr. Akashini's understanding, a process of adaptation and fertilization and fecundity, at last reached fruition.

Within a minute or two, the room grew as dark as night, and yet still those strange silver eyes burned forth. It seemed to Arce that the body must have dissolved, that the eyes, thickly woven cobwebs, were suspended by a clever arrangement of strands. But then the eyes moved closer and he realized that Mr. Akashini was taking one unsteady step after another toward the door.

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Expectación caught Arce's arm. "Hurry!" she cried. "Nacho has gone for help!"

Turning, Arce saw that, indeed, the hotel owner was nowhere to be found, a snail's track of blood along the wall giving evidence of his passage toward the stairs.

"For Christ's sake, *Papá!*" Expectación gave him a push. "Don't just stand there gawking."

"No, wait!"

Arce shook her off, ripped off his shirt and wrapped it about his face. Then he dashed into room 23, dived onto the floor and groped for the brick behind which he had hidden the money, trying not to breathe. Once he had secured the packet of checks, he scrambled to his feet and came face to face with Mr. Akashini—with a gray deformity, with newborn moths breaking free from a glutinous grain of skin and mold, with a shadow of a mouth, with tepid slow breath, with two eyes of green and cold silver. The webs of the eyes were a marvelous texture admitting to an infinite depth of interwoven strands, and Arce saw within them a tropic of green and silver, a loom of event and circumstance, and felt that if he were to continue staring, he would see not only the truth as Mr. Akashini had come to know it but also his truth and Expectación's. Then he became afraid, and the eyes were again only webs, and the face before him, with its hideous growths, appeared a thing of incalculable menace. Yet the spores and the insects and the moths that had transformed the *marañeros* into anonymous heaps were keeping clear of him, and he realized even then that some relic of Mr. Akashini's soul was employing restraint.

Arce wanted to say something, to convey some good wish, but he could think of nothing that would not seem foolish. With mixed emotions, not sure what he should feel for Mr. Akashini, he retreated into the corridor, grabbed Expectación by the arm and sprinted for the stairs.

A line of pink showed above the black wall of the jungle, and only a few stars pricked the indigo sky directly overhead; the neon signs over the bars were pale in the brightening air, and shadows were beginning to fill in the ruts in the muddy streets. The coolness of the night was already being dispelled. There were only a handful of people out—two drunks staggering along arm in arm; an old Indian man in rags hunkered down beside a door, smoking a pipe; farther along, a whore was yelling at a shirtless youth. Arce led Expectación out of the hotel and started toward the jungle, but after about twenty yards, she balked.

"Where are you going?" she asked, pulling free of him.

"The Malsueño. We'll be safe there. I know places. . . ."

"The hell with you! I'm not going in there!"

He made to grab her, but she danced away.

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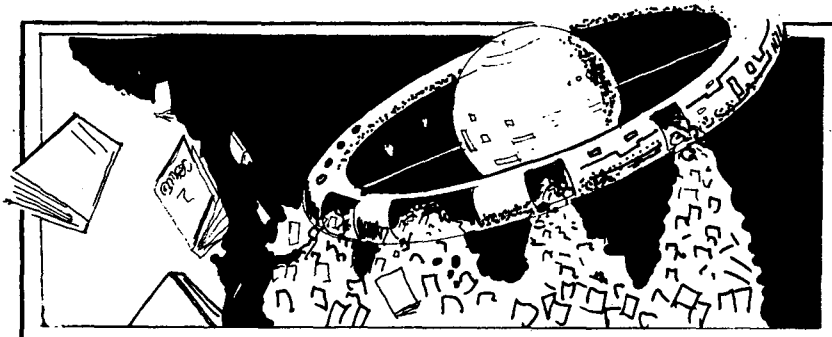

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"You're nuts, *Papá*! Nacho'll have everybody looking for us! We have to get far away! The capital! That's the only place we'll be safe."

He stood gazing uncomprehendingly at her, seeing faces from another time, stung by old pains, experiencing a harrowing fear of displacement like that he had felt on being forced to flee the capital.

"Come on!" she shouted. "Nacho'll be here any second. We can take one of the cars parked back of the market."

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?" She went back to him and pounded on his chest, her face twisted with anger and frustration. "You're going to get us killed . . . just standing here."

Although the blows hurt, he let her beat on him, ashamed of his fear and incapacity. Even when he saw Nacho turn the corner, at his back a group of *marañeros* armed with machetes, he was unable to take a step away from the place where he had hidden from memories and pain and life itself for all these years.

Expectación, too, had begun to cry. "You really blew it, *Papá!* We had a chance, you and me." She went a few faltering steps toward the highway. "Damn you!" she said. "Damn you!" Then, with her arms pumping, she fled along the street.

In the other direction, Nacho was limping forward, holding his back with one hand, pointing at Arce with the other, while at his rear, like a squad of drunken soldiers, the *marañeros* whooped and brandished their machetes. Arce drew his knife, determined to make a final stand.

At that moment, however, torrents of spores and insects and serpents and unidentifiable scraps of life exploded from the windows and the door of the hotel, making it appear that the building had been filled to bursting with black fluid. A whirling cloud formed between Nacho and Arce. At its core, Arce thought he spotted a shadow, an indistinct manlike shape with glowing eyes, but before he could be certain of it, the edge of the cloud frayed and streams of insects raced toward him and stung his face and neck and arms.

Blinded, he staggered this way and that, harrowed by the insects, and then he ran and ran, the dark cloud sending forth rivers of tormenting winged things to keep him on his course. As he passed through the outskirts of town, a white pickup rocketed out of a side street and swerved to the side, barely missing him, coming to a rest against a light pole. Through the windshield, he made out Expectación's startled face. Without thinking, desperate to escape the insects, he flung himself into the truck, began rolling up the window and shouted at her to drive. She gunned the engine and, pursued by the swarm, they fishtailed out onto the highway.

* * *

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They drove into the hills with the sky reddening at their backs, and after experiencing a flurry of panic on recognizing the course that had been chosen for him, it seemed to Arce that with every mile—in a process of self-realization exactly contrary to Mr. Akashini's—he was shedding a coating of fear and habit and distorted view, as if a shell were breaking away from some more considered inner man. Not the man he had been but the man he had become without knowing it, tempered by years of solitary endeavor. He felt strong, directed, full of youthful enthusiasms.

He would go to the capital, he decided, not to inhabit the past but to build a future, to make of it a temple that would honor the eccentric brotherhood that existed between himself and Mr. Akashini, a brotherhood that he had not embraced, that he could not have acknowledged or understood before, that he did not wholly understand now, but whose consummation had filled him with the steel of purpose and the fire of intent. He realized that they were both men who had lost themselves, Mr. Akashini to the persuasions of arrogance and wealth, himself to the deprivations of pain and despair, and how because of the fortuitous propinquity of a peculiar ambition and a woman of energy and strength and a magical jungle, he at least had been afforded the opportunity to move on.

He could not take any such pleasure, however, in Mr. Akashini's death, and when he looked at Expectación, the lines of her face aglow with pink light, when he felt the tenderness she had begun to rouse in him and saw the challenge she presented, the potential for poignant emotion, for grief and joy and love, those vital flowers he had rejected for so long, the prospect of an adventure with her was dimmed by regret that he had been unable to do more than speed Mr. Akashini to his end.

It wasn't fair, he thought.

He had done little, risked little, and yet he had won through to something real, whereas Mr. Akashini had only suffered and died among strangers far from home. This inequity caused Arce to think that perhaps he had won nothing, to wonder if everything he felt was the product of delusion. But as they climbed high into the hills, on glancing back toward Santander Jimenez, he saw there a sight that seemed to memorialize all that had happened: Trillions of insects and spores and things unnamable were spiraling above the miserable little town, a towering blackness that—despite a blustery wind—maintained its basic form, at one moment appearing to be the shadow of a great curved sword poised to deliver a sundering blow and at the next, a column of ashes climbing to heaven against the crimson pyre of the rising sun. ●

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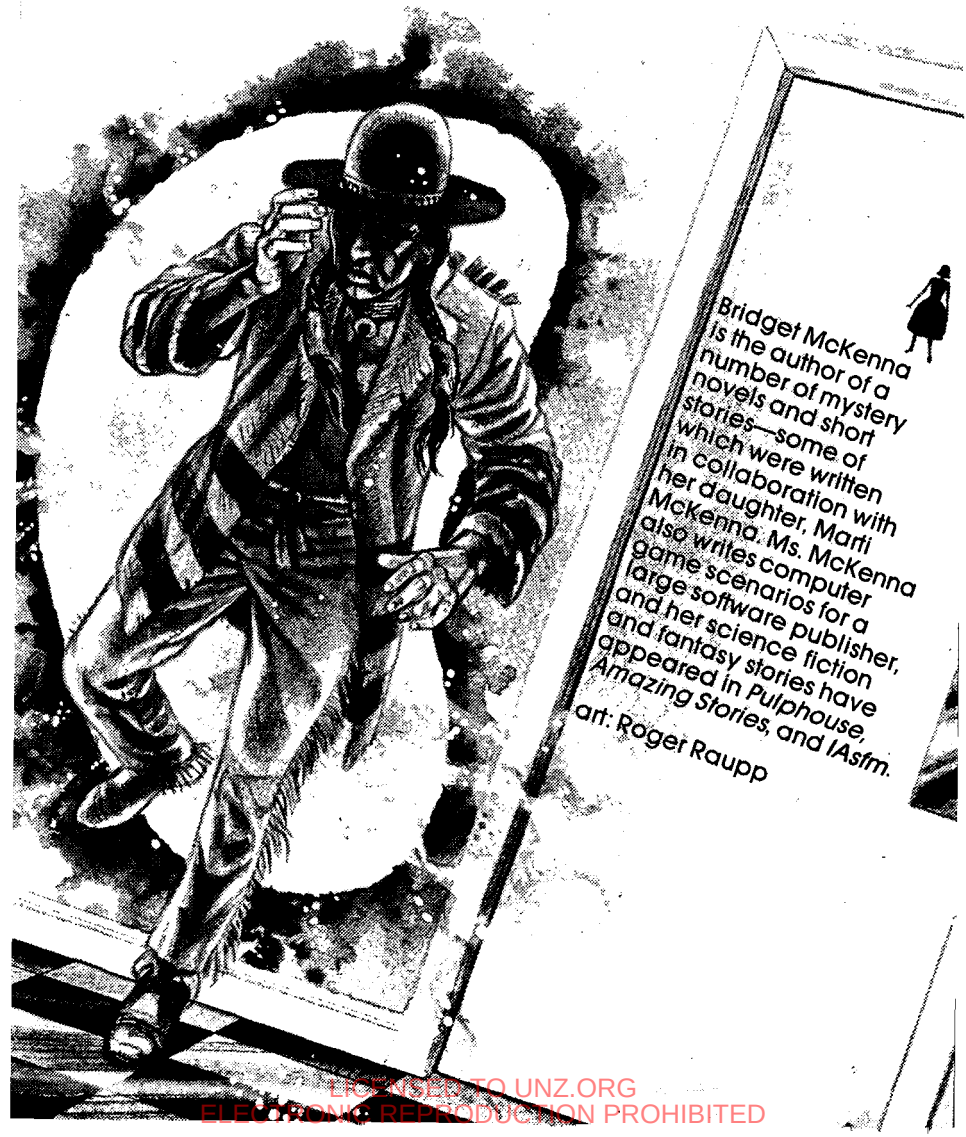
HOLE-IN-THE-WALL

by Bridget McKenna



Bridget McKenna is the author of a number of mystery novels and short stories—some of which were written in collaboration with her daughter, Marti McKenna. Ms. McKenna also writes computer game scenarios for a large software publisher, and her science fiction and fantasy stories have appeared in *Pulphouse*, *Amazing Stories*, and *IAsfm*.

art: Roger Raupp

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Morton Grimes knew it was going to be of those cases even before he walked inside the diner. Pulling the file from his portfolio, he scanned the application: Ladislaw Tomacheski—a communist name, for starters, and Grimes was no fool when it came to commies. He never missed an episode of "I Led Three Lives." Flicking a thread from his coatsleeve, he opened the screen door and went inside.

The place seemed clean enough on the inside, but Grimes knew how clean a restaurant could look to the uneducated eye and still be a pesthole; knew all the places dirt could hide, breeding bacteria and foul smells. He shuddered as he bent down to check a red-upholstered stool, running his hand down the chrome column, bending low to see the interstices around the plate that bolted the stool to the linoleum. It all looked clean enough, but then, this place was still operating on the temporary Ed Crawford had awarded last week. Give him a few more months to get sloppy, like they all did when they forgot Morton Grimes was watching.

"Can I help you with something? Maybe you lose something down there?" A heavily accented voice spoke from above him.

Grimes stood up quickly, rapping his head on the underside of the counter. Pain clouded his vision as he steadied himself with the chrome-studded seat of the stool and straightened his legs cautiously. "Mr. Tomakowski, I presume?" he said to the field of white before him which was slowly beginning to focus into a large beefy man a full head taller than he, in kitchen whites and apron.

"Tomacheski," the figure said, extending a huge hand.

Grimes tried to grasp it with the ends of his fingers, but the hand engulfed his and squeezed, pumping his arm up and down like an oil rig. He pulled loose and reached into his pocket for a card. "Morton Grimes. Health Department Officer."

"Oh, yes. You came to grant my A-card! How do you do, Mr. Grimes!" The arm-pumping began all over again. "An unfortunate name for a man in your profession, yes?"

Grimes stiffened. "An A-placard is not given lightly, Mr. Tomacheski. I'll be making an extensive inspection of your premises." Oh, indeed, I will, you Red bastard. The accent was definitely Russian, Grimes thought. This guy wasn't even trying to sound like an American. Of course that could mean he wasn't really a communist, since if he was, he probably wouldn't sound so much like one. Well, he could decide about that later, he had an inspection to do.

". . . Of course we weren't expecting you until Wednesday," the Russian was saying.

"Bacteria don't make appointments, Mr. Tomacheski. A Health Department Officer is empowered to inspect a business at any time."

"Of course. Well, where would you like to begin?"

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"Let's begin with the exterior of the premises. On the application here, it says that the name of the business is 'Tomacheski's Hole in the Wall.' You would not appear to be doing business under that name."

"But yes, of course. That's the name. What it says right there on the paper."

"Yet," Grimes continued, warming up now, "There is no sign outside to that effect. There is only *that*."

He pointed out the front window at the sign, which said only EAT, but said it so brightly that even in broad daylight it was sending coruscating pink and green waves through the glass bricks that made up most of the front wall.

"This is a little place, Mr. Grimes." He put two huge hands close together to show how small. "The name is too big for the building. But EAT is what people come here to do, yes? So the sign says the important thing. Excuse me, but this is a concern of the Health Department, this sign business?"

"Not exactly, Mr. Tomacheski, but the Department doesn't operate in a vacuum. We have an understanding with other branches of city and county government to report possible violations of any nature."

"Well, the sign has been approved by the county, Mr. Grimes. Now, where would you like to begin?"

"With the kitchen." Grimes pushed ahead of the big man in the narrow space between the counter stools and the booths and walked into the back of the diner. "Well, here's your first problem right here," he said, pulling out a notepad and his Parker, "Peeling paint on the wall of the, uh . . ." He peered around the corner. "Ladies' Room. Peeling paint is a serious health hazard in a food service establishment. Lead, you know."

The paint seemed to melt and run even as Grimes looked at it. He put his finger to the wall to determine the degree of flaking. A hot tingling ran up his arm to the elbow and he pulled away, shaking his hand. "What have you got here, Tomacheski? Loose wiring in this wall? I think the Fire Department will want to know about this."

"They were here yesterday, Mr. Grimes, and the wiring is good in this building. The paint is good too, I think. I saw this same thing yesterday morning, and I think it is only a trick of the light. Look." He pointed at the wall. The spot was gone.

Grimes touched the wall lightly with an index finger. No shock. No paint. He stood there for a moment, feeling puzzled and not liking it. Then he turned on his heel and pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen with Tomacheski following close behind. A row of high windows illuminated the room with a fine morning light. Grimes marched into the cooking area and stopped dead in his tracks. Tomacheski pulled up, but too late to avoid bumping Grimes, who was propelled forward

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into the arms of the very Negro whose presence in the kitchen had alarmed him so.

"You all right, Mister?" the Negro asked, setting him back on his feet.

Grimes pulled away from the man's grasp and brushed off his clothes. "I'm fine," he croaked. "Fine." He stared for a moment at the black face, the white cap and apron, then spun around to face Tomacheski. "We need to talk. Out there." He walked back through the kitchen doors and into the dining room.

"You weren't in the kitchen very long, Mr. Grimes. You sure you saw everything you need to see?"

"I'm scarcely finished with my inspection, Mr. Tomacheski. In fact, you might say I'm just getting started." He pointed back the way they had come. "Mr. Tomacheski, there's a Negro in your kitchen." He folded his arms across his chest and waited for the other man's reply.

Tomacheski blinked, furrowed his brow, and blinked again. "Yes."

"Well, who is he, and what is he doing there?" Grimes could hear his voice climbing a bit, like it always did when his blood pressure went up. He could definitely feel it going up now.

"He's Leon Duffy and he washes dishes, and I'm training him to cook so maybe he won't have to wash dishes the rest of his life." He cocked his head slightly, narrowed his eyes at Grimes. "Is there a problem you have with this arrangement between Mr. Duffy and myself?"

"Just this, Mr. Tomacheski, there are a lot of men—white men—out of work in this country despite Mr. Eisenhower's best efforts. We have an understanding in this town about Negroes; about selling property to them, and about encouraging them to settle here by giving them jobs that could go to white men. Do you take my meaning?"

"Not entirely, Mr. Grimes, but I don't speak the language so well yet. This is a law, this thing about not hiring Negroes?"

"Not exactly a law, Mr. Tomacheski—an understanding."

"There are a lot of these 'understandings' around here, yes?"

"Exactly. And they help keep things running smoothly with very little unpleasantness. That's the way we like it. When you grasp the way things work here, things will run smoothly for you, too." He reached into his portfolio and withdrew a shiny new A-placard with the seal of the Health Department emblazoned in gold in the center of the A. He smiled up at Tomacheski, waiting.

"Curse me for an ignorant immigrant, Mr. Grimes, but I don't understand your 'understandings.' Every night, except for Saturday when I go see a movie, I study the U.S. Constitution for my citizenship test. Nowhere do I find it written that I can't train a dishwasher to be a cook."

Grimes could have sworn that Tomacheski was deliberately avoiding his point. He felt the beginnings of a tension headache crawling up his

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neck to the back of his skull. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a careful breath. "He'll have to have a blood test, a skin Tuberculin test, and a lung X-ray in order to obtain a food worker's permit. Without a food worker's permit, he cannot work in your kitchen. And to obtain such a permit, he will have to go through my department."

"Oh, he has these things already. He paid for all those tests last week."

His vacation. Crawford had done it while he was away on vacation. The headache arrived in full force. Grimes slipped the A-placard back and pulled out a different one—sun-faded, flyspecked, and marked with a large blue letter B. "My inspection reveals serious nonconformance with Health Department standards. You will remove your temporary permit and display this B-placard until my next inspection."

"But you haven't inspected anything yet!" Tomacheski protested. "This is terribly unfair, Mr. Grimes. You know I deserve an A-card. This restaurant is spotless. You could eat off this floor!"

Grimes glanced at the red and white linoleum, then up at Tomacheski. "County regulations require you to display this card until the premises have been inspected again." He smiled briefly and turned to leave. That should take care of the Negro business.

Tomacheski followed him to the door. "Well, when is the next inspection?"

"You'll have to call for an appointment, but I'll warn you right now, I'm a very busy man. I may not be able to make it back for, oh . . . sixty days."

"No customers will want to come to a B-card restaurant. In sixty days I could be closed down!"

Grimes tucked his portfolio up under his arm. "Business is uncertain in the best of times, Mr. Tomacheski. Perhaps the next proprietor at this location will prove more amenable to the way we do things around here. Good day." He walked out onto the sidewalk. The screen door clicked shut—a lovely sound.

He arrived back at the department in the early afternroon. There was a message from Crawford. He left the day's files on his desk and walked down the hall to Crawford's office.

"Come in," Crawford called from the other side of the door. Grimes walked in and stood before the hopelessly cluttered desk of the Chief Health Officer. He doubted Ed Crawford had seen the surface of his desk in months. "You asked to see me, Ed?"

"Yeah, Mort. What exactly is this Tomacheski business? Did you actually perform an inspection on his premises today, or didn't you?"

So. The Russian had gone over his head. "There are serious problems at that place, Ed."

"You have samples? Is the lab starting cultures?"

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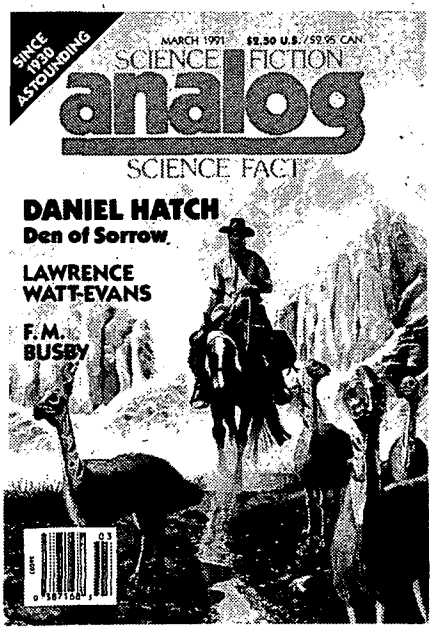

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"This isn't exactly something you can culture, Ed." He crossed his hands behind his back, tapped his toe on the floor.

Crawford looked up at him expectantly. "Well?"

"This guy Tomacheski has a Negro working for him. As a cook."

"Oh, yes. That would be the fellow who was in here getting tests last week. Don't see too many Negroes applying for food cards around here. Came out clean as a whistle, though." He shuffled through a stack of file folders, scattering loose papers across the desk.

Grimes went on tapping, a little harder now. "Ed, you're a newcomer around here, relatively speaking, and if you'll pardon my saying so, you haven't gone out of your way to fit in—join up—you know what I mean, I guess. But there are things we do in this town and things we don't do. Encouraging Negroes to live and work here is one of the things we just don't do." He nodded sagely, certain that Crawford would understand.

"Let me tell you what I do, Mort," Crawford said, rising from his chair. "I enforce the health regulations and protect the health standards of this county. I do not decide who will live or work here, and neither do you. It's simply not our job." He handed Grimes a sheet of paper. "You have an appointment at ten A.M. tomorrow to conduct a genuine Health Department inspection of Tomacheski's Hole in the Wall and grant or withhold his A-placard based on the results of that inspection. Is that clear?"

Grimes took the appointment slip and left the office. On his way back down the hall he reduced the paper to a tight, sweaty ball in his fist, and lobbed it at a wastebasket. It missed.

Tomacheski met him at the front door. "We've got a little problem back in the kitchen, Mr. Grimes. I don't know if this would be such a good time for your inspection."

Grimes beamed. "You made an appointment, Tomacheski—I'm keeping it." He advanced down the row of stools, Tomacheski retreating before his burning righteousness. "Just what is the nature of your problem?"

"You remember that funny spot on the Ladies' Room wall?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"Well it came back this morning, only worse."

"Probably comes from using cheap paint. I won't be able to pass you if there's any peeling. Lead, you know."

"I'm afraid it's worse than just paint." Tomacheski stopped retreating just outside the kitchen doors.

"Well? Don't just stand there. What happened?"

"It sort of opened up."

"The door to the Ladies' Room?"

"Not exactly. Sort of a hole. Where you thought the paint was bad."

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"And?" Grimes was running short of patience with this ignorant commie, or not-commie, whatever he was.

"He's in the kitchen." Tomacheski pushed open the doors with his back and gestured Grimes inside, never taking his eyes from Grimes' face.

Grimes strode into the kitchen. What he saw inside nearly made him stride out again. The Negro was still there, of course, but Grimes scarcely noticed him next to the filthy, louse-ridden Indian sitting on a bench under the window and slurping soup from a Buffalo China cup. Grimes clutched his portfolio under his arm and struggled to control his voice. "What is *that* doing here?"

"That's what I was trying to explain. This hole opened up, you know, on the wall of the Ladies' Room, and he sort of fell through."

"He was in the Ladies' Room?" Grimes could feel his voice rising in step with his blood pressure. *"What was he doing in the Ladies' Room?"*

Tomacheski and the Negro were staring at him in amazement. The Indian had pulled his blanket up over his head and was peeking out with one frightened eye. Grimes stood in one spot and trembled, imagining the bacteria count on one square inch of that skin. He put two fingers on his left wrist and felt his pulse. Not good. This bastard Tomacheski was going to be the death of him. He turned toward the Russian, took two deep breaths and let them out slowly. "What," he repeated in a voice dripping control like icicles, "Was this Indian doing in the Ladies' Room?"

"I don't think he was in the Ladies' Room, exactly. You see, the wall started looking funny again, like it did yesterday and the day before, only this time it got worse, and it turned into a kind of a hole, and there was a great snowstorm on the other side."

"A blizzard," interjected Duffy. "And there was all this snow blowing in on the floor, and all this cold wind, like to froze us both!"

"Duffy tells the truth. It was like some other place in there. And then we saw someone walking toward us, and this poor fellow stumbles into the hallway."

"Well, why didn't you just push him right back through? He's a walking health hazard!"

"Because he was half-starved and half-frozen to death!" bellowed Tomacheski.

"And also because the hole closed up right after that," Duffy added. "Then it was just the wall again. Wasn't nothin' we could do after that. I think we're stuck with this guy."

"No," Tomacheski said, "I don't think so. What time were you here yesterday, Mr. Grimes?"

"Nine A.M."

"You're sure of that?"

Grimes snorted. "Of course I'm sure."

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"And that's when you saw the wall not looking just right. And the morning before that I saw it, too. I'm sure it was about the same time. I thought it was the light, remember? I think that if we just wait around until nine o'clock tomorrow morning . . ."

"Tomorrow morning!"

"Yeah!" said Duffy, "If the hole opens up again tomorrow morning we could put this guy back where he belongs, and everything could get back to normal around here."

"And in the meantime," added Tomacheski, "We could get together some food and warm clothes. Maybe some boots. . . ." He placed his foot next to the Indian's, comparing sizes.

"Mr. Tomacheski, you will take that . . . person to the Social Welfare Department *now* if you want to retain your permit to operate a restaurant." He turned and pushed through the swinging doors, knuckles white around the handle of his portfolio.

Tomacheski followed him into the dining area. "Mr. Crawford promised you would make an inspection."

Grimes turned at the door. "You will be open for business in less than two hours, and in your kitchen there is a filthy, infested savage not six feet from where food is being prepared."

"There's a little porch out back. I'll put him out there. He can't go to the Welfare, Mr. Grimes, he needs to go home."

Grimes said nothing, but fixed the Russian with his gaze.

"You come back tomorrow," Tomacheski said. "You come back and see for yourself. The hole will come back. And then he will go. But not before that, because I've been cold, Mr. Grimes, and I've been hungry, and I've got a home I can never go back to, and I won't do that to nobody."

Grimes looked up at the Russian and anger burned in his breast, clean and bright. "I'll be back all right. I'll be back at nine tomorrow morning with the Chief Health Officer. Enjoy your day, Mr. Tomacheski. It will be your last doing business in this county." He walked out and slammed the screen behind him.

Grimes adjusted his hat and knocked on Ed Crawford's door.

"Come on in, Mort."

"Ed, it's ten minutes till nine. Aren't you coming to Tomacheski's with me?"

"Yeah, Mort. You go on ahead. I'll be along in a couple of minutes in my car. I've got some things to straighten up here." He indicated a particularly tall pile on the desk.

"Well, hurry, Ed . . . please. This is important."

"Just a few minutes, Mort. I'll meet you there."

* * *

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The door was open, and Grimes walked in without knocking. He could hear voices coming from the back.

"I think it's starting. Look there."

"Yeah, there it goes. Get him ready, now."

Grimes hurried back to the hallway. Duffy and Tomacheski stood on either side of the Indian with bags of provisions. They were all staring at the Ladies' Room wall, where a widening hole was forming from churning whiteness that boiled out of . . . Grimes steadied himself on Tomacheski's arm and looked away for a moment.

"You see, Mr. Grimes?" Tomacheski was shouting over the roar that was emanating from the hole. "It was true, what I said. This hole goes somewhere. Look!"

The hole was about five feet tall now, and lengthening, but on the other side was not a raging blizzard, but a narrow alley between two tall buildings. The scent of rubber and auto exhaust drifted through. A whistle sounded in the distance, and they could hear shouts and running footsteps. A balding man in a shabby suit rounded the corner of a building and ran straight for them, a blue-coated policeman in hot pursuit. Grimes yelped as the man ran through the wall, bowled him over, and slammed through the kitchen doors.

Duffy and Tomacheski hurried into the kitchen. The Indian looked down at Grimes and said something in its barbaric language that sounded vaguely sympathetic. The hole closed as rapidly as it had opened.

Grimes got up and brushed himself off. This was not going according to plan. And where the hell was Crawford? Well, no matter. He had that immigrant pinko now. No more extensions, no more inspections, just CLOSED. Finis. Done with. He turned and pushed on one door, which flew back in his face as the shabby man rushed back out of the kitchen.

"Where the hell am I?" the man shouted, looking around wildly.

Grimes felt his nose gingerly. It didn't seem to be broken, but it was dripping blood onto his shirt and tie. He placed his folded handkerchief under it. He felt strangely calm in spite of all the shouting and confusion, bums and Indians and colored fry cooks and communist restaurant owners. Ed Crawford would be here any minute and he could wash his hands of this place forever.

Tomacheski and Duffy had followed the bum out of the kitchen and were trying to calm him down. The Indian was standing by Duffy's elbow looking back over his shoulder at Grimes, who was looking at the Ladies' Room wall. Sweet Jesus, it was happening again!

A churning nothingness was growing out of the wall, or into it, shaping itself into a long ovoid that stretched and grew as he watched, unable to speak or look away. Now Tomacheski could see it too, and he was backing away in tortuous slow motion, grabbing Duffy by the arm. Their

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mouths were moving, but all Grimes could hear was the awful roaring. He realized he was moving toward the hole—not walking, it seemed—just gliding across (above?) the linoleum toward the Ladies' Room wall.

He put his hand out as he came up to it and it tingled like before, but this time he found it a somewhat pleasant sensation, and did not pull away. It engulfed his hand, moved up his arm to his chest, and was all over him in an instant. From somewhere far away, he felt his face form a smile.

He was still smiling when he realized he was no longer in the diner, but in a plain white room with no windows. He was sitting on a white box on a white floor. The bum and the Indian were seated on identical boxes, and their faces slowly began to echo his confusion as they looked around at the featureless room. A door he hadn't seen opened and a woman stepped through. She was wearing fewer clothes than a Pageant Pin-Up, and her hair was bright blue.

"Hello, Mr. Grimes. I hope we haven't startled you." Grimes thought about it and decided he was definitely startled. "Where's Tomacheski? Where am *I*? This can't be the Ladies' Room." He looked around. Two other odd-looking people were talking to the bum and the Indian, who looked pretty startled, too.

The woman smiled. "No, Mr. Grimes, I'm afraid you're . . . someplace else. This is a holding area, actually. Visually sterile, to minimize unfamiliarity. I'll change it for you if you like."

A wall appeared, a desk, some bookshelves. The boxes became chairs. They were alone. She was behind the desk in a white jacket, a stethoscope peeking out of one pocket. Bad choice. Doctors' offices always made him sick.

"It's only a temporary displacement, we hope. We seem to have a bug in the system."

"Bug?" Grimes' upper lip wrinkled involuntarily.

"There's been a . . . glitch?"

He stared at her blankly.

"A fuck-up."

Grimes blanched.

"Technical difficulties beyond our control. At any rate, we'll have you back in A.D. 1956 very soon." She watched him as he absorbed this, then took a fountain pen out of her coat. "In the meantime, let's talk about Mr. Tomacheski. Give me your hand, please."

He held out his hand and she pushed up his sleeve and passed the pen across the inside of his arm. It didn't leave a mark, so maybe it wasn't a pen, but he began to feel better immediately. Calmer. He still didn't understand, but it didn't seem to matter as much. "What about Tomacheski?" he asked.

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"Given your present course of action in A.D. 1956, it seems unlikely that he'll be able to continue doing business in that location."

Grimes shrugged. "I don't particularly want him to stay in business."

"I see. But we do. And we don't consider your wishes to be more important than our own in this matter." She looked around, indicated the paneled office with her hands. "This spot is quite simply the best natural spacetime nexus on this continent, and as long as we control it, we will have things the way we want them. We have decided that Tomacheski will remain in business until A.D. 1975, when he will retire peacefully to California." She looked him in the eye. "We have plans. Those plans require things to remain just as they are at Tomacheski's. We won't allow any tampering."

Grimes tried to summon up indignation. "Nobody tells Morton Grimes how to do his job." He didn't sound very indignant, he realized, and he probably ought to be frightened, too, but he couldn't manage it, somehow. "Nobody."

"Wrong, Mr. Grimes. We do." She swung her feet up onto the desk. "Of course there is an alternative." She smiled a thin smile not unlike his own. "We could always keep you here."

"You could what? What do you mean keep me? I'm a citizen. I have rights. I want to call my lawyer! Who the hell are you, anyway?" He suddenly remembered how to be frightened.

She leaned forward and stroked his arm again with the pen. Or whatever. "One point at a time, Mr. Grimes. To begin with, your rights are moot here. If by 'you' you mean me, I am the person currently giving you orders. Think of me as a doctor of sorts. If you mean all of us here, we are the party, clan, race—choose one or more as you wish—currently in charge of this locus. However powerful you may imagine us to be from what you have seen, you will almost certainly be underestimating us. We try not to be deliberately cruel to primitives, but we don't take shit from anybody. I hope that answers your questions. Believe me when I say that nothing can stop us from keeping you if we wish to do so."

Grimes nodded and shook a finger at her unsteadily. "You're talking time travel, here. I've seen 'Science Fiction Theater'; I know about these things. Well, then, what about my life? Won't it change something if I don't go back?"

She leaned back in the chair, hands in pockets. "Frankly, Mr. Grimes, you'd scarcely be missed. You never marry, never have children, never really affect another person's life in any significant way."

"You don't mean it. You can't keep me here." He crossed his arms in front of him, made an effort to frown, abandoned it.

"You don't know that, Mr. Grimes." She chuckled softly, shaking her head. "It's amusing, actually, when you see it from our point of view.

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You think you have a right to control other people's fate—Duffy, Tomacheski, the Indian—because you think you're naturally superior to them. That's bigotry. We control your fate because we actually *are* superior. That's simple fact."

The words stung. Grimes searched for a retort, but nothing came to him that he couldn't imagine her laughing off in that arrogant way, and then the moment for rebuttal passed, leaving him silent and powerless.

She watched him calmly for a moment, then cocked her head to one side as though listening to something he couldn't hear. "The malfunction has been repaired," she said, getting up from behind the desk. "The others will be waiting." The room dissolved to featureless white.

They were standing beside the Indian and the bum and two people even stranger-looking than his "doctor." The wall was going funny. A blinding whiter whiteness opened up in it—the sun on snow, with tall firs on a hill. The Indian shouldered his bags of Tomacheski's food and stepped through.

The hole closed, and opened again on an alley at night with a moon and streetlights shining on brick walls and wet pavement. There was a scent of rain and garbage. One of the people handed the bum a wad of genuine-looking currency and shook his hand. The bum gave Grimes a little wave and walked in.

"Your turn, Mr. Grimes," the doctor said, turning to him. "Which will it be? Return on our terms—or stay?"

He thought for a moment. How important was this immigrant diner-jockey in Morton Grimes' scheme of things? The world was going to hell anyway, and it wasn't going to get there any faster if one Russian hired one Negro to grill hamburgers. Maybe he shouldn't worry so much.

He had a choice, she said. He supposed he did, but he wouldn't have any problem making it. The world was changing a little faster than he would like, even in 1956, but even given that, it was a damn sight better than dirty-talking blue-haired women and disappearing doctors' offices and being treated like an invading bacillus. None of it seemed to be worth his time and trouble at this point.

"I can go back if I promise to leave Tomacheski alone?"

"You are not permitted to take any action that will endanger him or his business."

He supposed he could live with that. "Fine," he told her, "I'll go." He buttoned his shirtsleeve, straightened his tie and jacket. His hat must have blown off as he came through. He ran fingers through his hair as the hole began to grow again.

"You should arrive within a minute or so of your departure. Have an adequate life, Mr. Grimes, and remember—we'll be watching."

The hole punched through to the diner, with an agitated Tomacheski

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and Duffy talking and gesturing to someone he couldn't see. Grimes looked back for a moment to see if he was really free to go.

"You'd better hurry, or you'll miss this one. Go on." She made a hurry-along gesture at him, and he stepped forward onto his hat and into the arms of Ed Crawford.

"Mort! What the hell were you doing in the Ladies' Room? And where's that Indian you were raving about? You okay, Mort? You look terrible."

Grimes stepped back and turned around. The wall was a wall again. He picked up the hat and made a few useless attempts at straightening it, then put it on his head. He needed a drink, he decided—maybe two. He turned to Tomacheski, who was watching him expectantly. "My inspection is completed. Don't bother to see me out—I'll leave your A-placard on my way. Coming, Ed?"

Crawford looked confused, but turned to go.

"What about the Indian?" Tomacheski whispered, pointing at the wall.

"And the bum?" Duffy added.

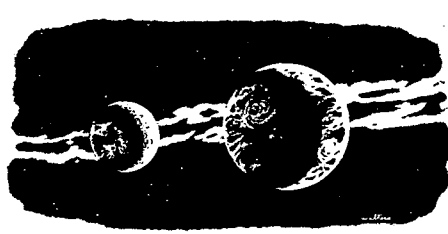
Grimes stooped to pick up his portfolio from the hallway floor. Suddenly he felt incredibly tired. He didn't understand the present, and the future stunk. He looked from Duffy to Tomacheski and nodded slowly, more to himself than to either of them. "Home," he said, tucking the case under his arm and following Crawford out of the hallway, "They've gone home."

Straightening his shoulders, Grimes walked down the narrow length of shining linoleum, pulsing pink and green with neon light, and paused to flip the A-placard onto the counter before he opened the screen door and let it click shut behind him.

He was home too, he supposed, but he couldn't find much joy in it, not given what he knew. He turned and looked back at the little diner and the garish sign, and at Duffy and Tomacheski watching him from the doorway. He scowled at them; they smiled and waved.

"The world is going straight to hell," he told them . . . but not loud enough so that they'd hear.

He pulled his hat low against the sunlight, and walked away. ●



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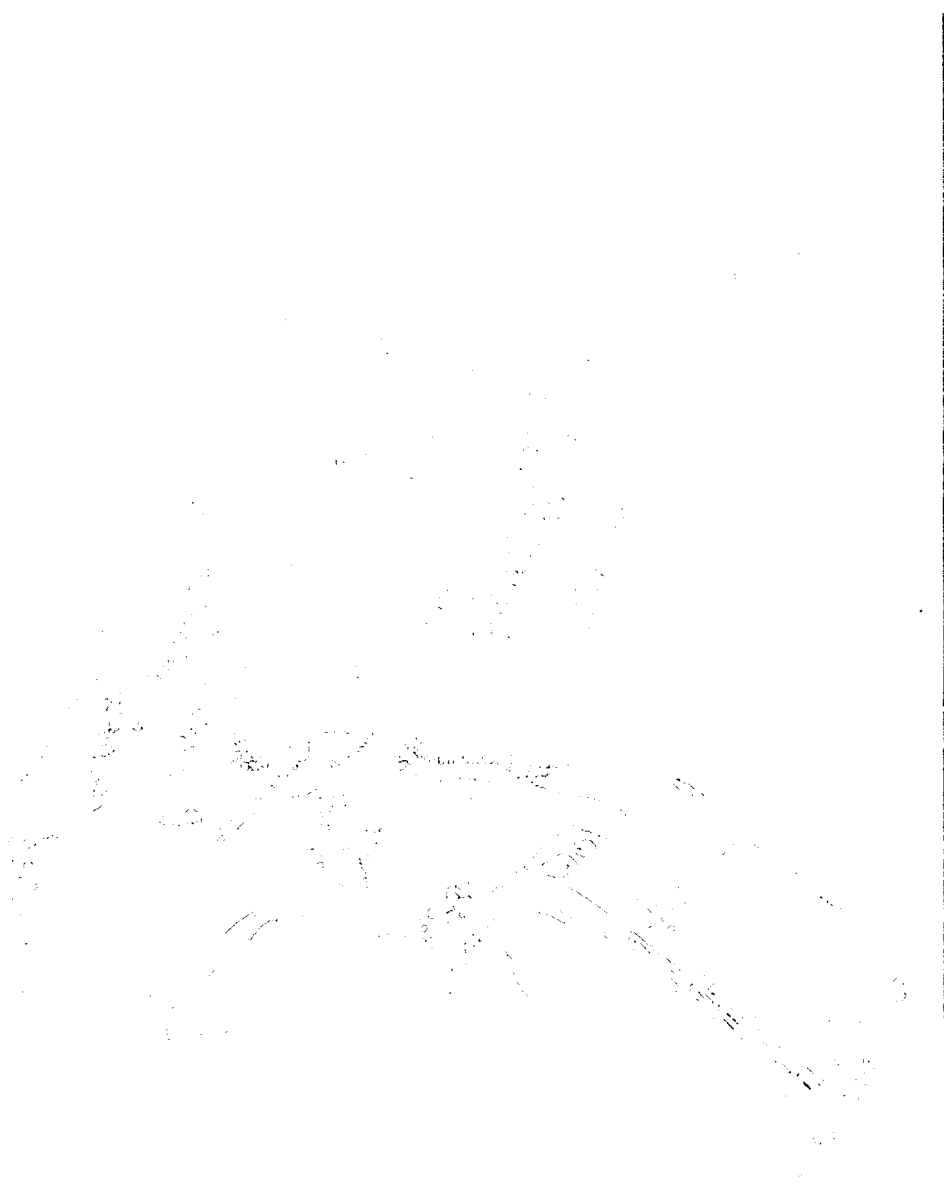

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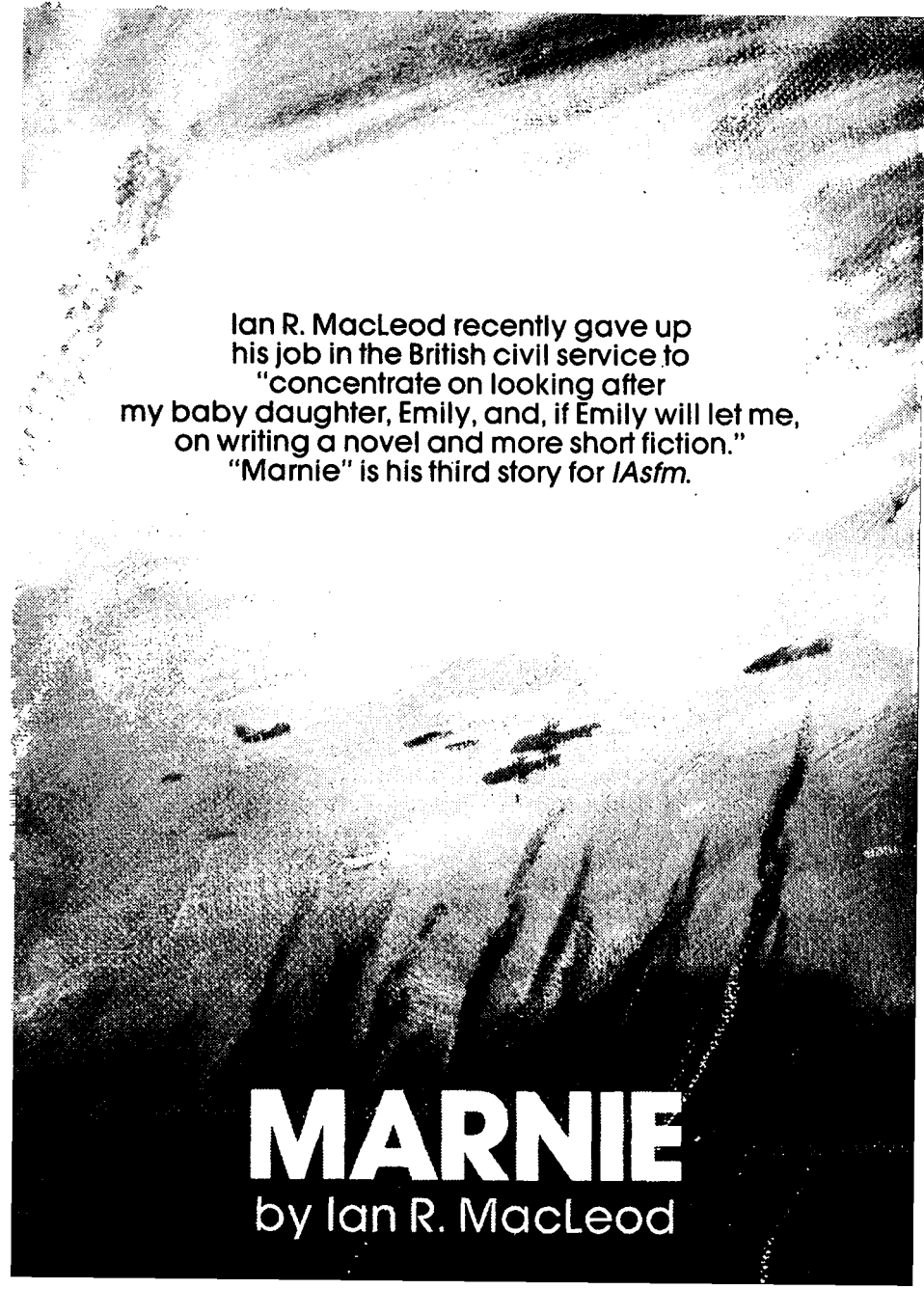

Ian R. MacLeod recently gave up his job in the British civil service to "concentrate on looking after my baby daughter, Emily, and, if Emily will let me, on writing a novel and more short fiction." "Marnie" is his third story for *IAsfm*.

MARNIE

by Ian R. MacLeod

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I'd arranged things so that I woke up on an ordinary morning. It was November, the winter term. My bedroom curtains were veined with frost and sunlight. And, for a long time, I just lay there, breathing the strange, familiar smells of this house and this bed and my own sleepy body, until the radio alarm lit up with the last pip of the eight o'clock time signal. It was reassuring to find that nothing had really changed. It was just an ordinary morning. I had ordinary things to do.

I got up and went to the bathroom, finding my way unthinkingly. The memories and sensations were crowding in too quickly for me to react, but, for now, nothing mattered as long as my body knew what to do. Opening doors with just the right pressure, twisting on the shower taps to get the hot water running before stepping in. My skin felt distant as I soaped myself. The contours and textures seemed right, yet didn't belong. I could sense my flesh, yet it was like touching a lover.

But even as I wondered at the strangeness of returning, the feeling was wearing off. The easy movement of my limbs began to seem natural. The full head of hair that I dried with smooth, strong hands that had reached automatically for the towel was no surprise. Age is relative, and one adjusts to its presence. And I reminded myself that I was, in any case, thirty-one—no longer quite young.

I wiped a space in the steamed-up mirror to shave. I recognized my face from the old, cold photographs. Here, moving and alive, I saw that the camera hadn't lied. It was an ungenerous face, the eyes too close, the nose too large. Insincere when it smiled. Pained when it tried to look sincere. I'd never grown used to it, and, seeing it again, with the deepened knowledge of what age would do, made me wonder—just as I had done all those years back, just as I had always done—exactly *what* Marnie had seen in me.

The shaving foam was Tesco's own, from the big store by the roundabout. The razor was a Bic. I marvelled at the rightness of the period detail, the barcodes and the price stickers still on the side. It seemed almost a pity to use them, like ransacking a museum. Brut 33 aftershave in a green plastic bottle on the shelf over the sink. Had people still used that stuff in the late 1980s? I unscrewed the silver cap and splashed some on my chest and face, smiling faintly at the thought of the advert they used to run. It was all coming back to me now. All of it. The dark, sweet smell of the aftershave. The toothpaste and brush in a broken-handled Charles and Diana mug. And, beside that, sitting just as naturally on the shelf, was a small bottle of Elizabeth Arden cleanser. Everything about the bottle, the casual thought with which Marnie had doubtless left it for next time, the screw top jammed on at a typically careless angle, hit me hard. I reached out to hold the bottle, touching

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where her fingers had touched. This was real enough. There was nothing to grin at, point at. This wasn't a museum.

Marnie, I thought. Marnie. Look again. She's all around you. Long strands of her blonde hair in the plughole. A half box of Tampax in the cabinet by the sink. The lipstick remains of *I love you* written on the tiles above the bath showing up through the condensation even though some tidy insanity had made me wipe it off with white spirit. Marnie: the thought that had filled and haunted my whole life. Marnie. Marnie. *Marnie.*

I got dressed, finding my socks and underpants tucked neatly in the right drawer. Hello, old friends. Then cords, a warmish grey cotton shirt, and a loosely knotted woollen tie that was a concession to my position at the University. Looking at myself fully dressed in the long wardrobe mirror, I felt ticklish threads of the ridiculous pulling once again at my mind. That collar, those cords! And that *tie*. I hadn't remembered looking quite as foolish as *this*. But memories change to suit the present.

I took breakfast listening to the plummy-voiced newscasters on Radio Four. I'd long forgotten the details, but nothing in the news came as a surprise, any more than it had been a surprise to find cartons of orange juice and milk waiting from yesterday in the fridge, or cartons of sugar-free muesli in the fitted cabinets, slit open and re-sealed neatly and precisely according to the instructions.

I was in two minds about whether to walk or drive to work. The walk was easy enough, but when I toured my house, touching and remembering all those old possessions, I spent longer in the garage than anywhere else, despite the winter chill. There, still looking clean and new, was my car, my pride and joy, the pinnacle of my overdraft. A Porsche: black and glossy as dark water. I'd forgotten just how proud I'd been of it, but that all came back as soon as I saw it and touched it and smelt it. After brooding at the wheel for some time, gazing at the slumbering dials, I decided it was better to be cautious on this first day. After all, I hadn't driven anything remotely like it for twenty years.

After brushing my teeth, I pulled on a tweed jacket that would, if my life proceeded as it had before, be stolen from under my seat at a cinema in Southport two years later.

The chilly, sunlit air beyond my front door was full of the city. It was a short walk to campus. I lived . . . *live* in a close of small and expensive modern semis built as an infill in one of the huge gardens of the big older houses that still characterized this area around the University. Most of my neighbours were young, like me, professional and well-paid, like me, single or married or living together, but always childless. Like me.

Even in this pretty, tree-lined area, the smells of parkland and old leaves were half-drowned, to my newly sensitized nose, by the metallic

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reek of car fumes. I had two main roads to cross. Both were filled with a dangerous, sluggish stream of cars. Startled by the bleep of the pelican crossing and urged on by an impatient old lady, I realized it hadn't been a mistake to leave the Porsche in the garage.

The interlinking suburban roads were nicer, more as I remembered them. Landscaped gardens and mock-Tudor gables. There were schoolchildren piling into ugly Volvos in driveways, and joggers and students walking, and students on bikes. This was my usual route, and many of the faces were familiar, people I passed day after day without acknowledgement. Everything was so neat, so orderly, so *expected.*

I went through the west gate into the campus. Staff and students drifted and talked and walked in the grassy spaces between the red brick and concrete. Faces came out at me from the past. I was a fixture here, part of the crew. Norman Harris from the Chancellor's office nodded in my direction as he walked away from his Sierra. Then I saw Stephanie Kent hurrying up the wide granite steps of the library, the same old woolen skirt tight as ever over the ample ridges of her knickers. And there was Jack Rattle, my own Head of Department, the latest Penguin in one hand and a sandwich box in the other.

We converged at the swing doors leading to the Graphic Arts Faculty. I held them open for him.

"Morning, Daniel," he said. "Another day, eh? Another few brain cells gone."

"Hardly any left," I said; it didn't sound right, but then I'd never really known how to respond to Jack. I wondered if he'd said the same thing to me on this same day all those years ago, and what my reply had been.

"You must," he tapped my elbow with the corner of his sandwich box, "you *must* show me what we're getting from that new plotter. Damn thing cost us enough."

"Sure. Just say when."

"I will. I will." Jack wandered off down the admin corridor to his own office, passing in and out of frames of window sunlight. I paused for a moment beneath the frescoes at the foot of the marble stairs, watching him, wondering if it was foreknowledge or if the signs were really there that his heart would kill him in the spring.

A few students pushed past me as I dawdled, huffy and in a rush. In the sixties and seventies, any arts faculty would have been filled with campus peacocks even this deep into winter term, but now, with the odd green-haired exception, the students were heavy with overcoats, anxiety, and books, just like all the trainee lawyers and engineers in the other faculties. Like everyone else, they wanted their grades, they wanted a job, they wanted money.

I checked my watch. It was 9:35. That was just right; my tutorial

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should have started at half past. Although it was quite impossible that anyone could find me out, I nevertheless felt it was important to give nothing away by changing my habits.

My legs were suddenly a little weak as I took the stairs to the second level: a strong and unexpected return of the feeling that my body didn't *belong* to me. In a sense, of course, it *didn't*, but I pushed that thought down as I passed the Burne-Jones stained-glass and the fire hydrants at the stair turns. This was not the time to hesitate, not when I had a tutorial to get through. Just don't think, I told myself. It worked well enough before.

Along the waxed gleam of the east corridor. Notice boards and past students' efforts on the walls. Rooms 212, 213, 213A, 214.

214. I took a deep breath and walked in. The chatter ceased reluctantly. The air smelt a little of someone's BO, and a lot of the plastic of the computer terminals that had only been in place since the start of the term.

"Good morning." I powered up the master screen, proud of the swift and easy way my hands moved across the switches and keys. "This week we'll continue our exploration of the ways we can expand from the basic paintbox options . . ."

I paused and looked around at the faces, half-familiar now as they had been then. From the bored expressions, it was obvious that they accepted me without question. I knew that I'd passed a test; my nerves were loosening by the moment. I continued talking at a brisk pace, hardly referring to my notes.

Living in the past was easy.

I closed the tutorial at eleven, and the students drifted out, leaving the garish perspective tricks that the inexperienced or untalented generally produce shimmering on their screens. The computer was still logged for our use, and they could have continued, but, for all of them, the novelty of pressing keys to make things happen on a screen had worn off. Too lazy to walk around the room and look (and how quickly the habits of my lecturing days were coming back!), I called their efforts up, reduced to quarter windows, on my own screen, and saved them for next week's session, unthinkingly hitting the right keys. View, Save, Name, Return. It was an oddly absorbing task, and probably the first time this morning that, with the success of the tutorial behind me, I'd felt completely at home.

The students had left the door open, and Marnie entered the room without my noticing. She'd crept up close behind me before I knew, suddenly, that she was there—and that she was real.

It was strange, to come this far and then to be almost taken by surprise. She put her arms around my neck. Her hair brushed my face. I could

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smell the shampoo and acacia, and the cigarette she'd just smoked, and the wool of her scarf, and the faint, bitter sweetness of her breath.

"When are you going to give this up," she said, her voice serious but trickling down with every word towards laughter. "Why don't you let the machines get *on* with it?"

"Could I be replaced that easily?"

"That's right," she said. Her hands pressed against my chest, then suddenly released. ". . . old boffin like you . . ." She spun the chair around so that I faced her. ". . . and how is the old boffin anyway?"

"Same as yesterday," I said. "Let's have coffee."

Marnie's good mood was frail, as I knew it would be. She walked with her head down as we crossed the bright, busy campus, like a child aiming to miss the cracks in the pavement. I'd have liked to have taken her hand, just to be touching her, but I knew it wasn't the sort of thing we'd usually done.

We queued in the cafeteria. Marnie was silent and I couldn't think of anything to say. The woman at the till shook her head and gave me a funny look when I offered my Visa card to pay for the coffee. I don't think Marnie noticed. We took our cups over to an empty table by the window that two Arab students had just vacated. The plastic seat felt warm. I was noticing these things, the steam rising from the slowly spinning froth of the coffee, and the way someone had spooned the sugar to one side of the bowl that lay between us: with Marnie, everything was more vivid. It always had been.

"Is this a busy day?" she asked, lifting the cup with both hands, blowing with that beautiful mouth, sipping. A little of the froth stayed on the faint down along her top lip.

"We could be together, if you like."

"That could be nice," she said.

"Could?"

"Depends on what sort of let's-be-together-day it is."

"I love you, Marnie." For thirty years, I'd been wanting to say those words to her again.

She put the cup down with a slight bang. Her eyes travelled across my face, onwards to the window, the wandering students amid the winter-bare trees, the big buildings beyond. "I don't feel right in this place," she said. "All this architecture. Look at the people out there. Standing, wandering around, talking. It's all such a pose. You know, like one of those architect's drawings you see. Prospective developments. And little sketches of people in the foreground . . . imaginary people doing imaginary things, just to give the whole neat concept a sense of scale. It's not *real*, people standing around like that, you only ever get anything actually like it at a university."

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"It's just a place," I said. "We're both here. You. Me. That's real enough."

"And this is going to be a you-and-me day?"

"I'd like it to be," I said.

"I've got a couple of lectures and a life study I could skip."

"Then," I said, "there's no problem."

She didn't reply. There was still froth on her lip and I wanted to mention it, but knew I shouldn't. This whole thing was doubly confusing: my searching for the right words to bridge the awkwardness that was already between us was compounded by the continued vague promptings of memory, a feeling of drifting in and out of the flow. I'd imagined that it would be easy to draw things away from the patterns of the past, but Marnie was still the same, and, now that I was here, I was surprised at how little *I* had changed. I decided that the best thing was to take a new tack, and say those things to her that I'd always wanted to say.

I swallowed some coffee. Another distraction. I'd forgotten the way the university coffee used to taste. Something about it always reminded me of floormops. I was like Proust, but instead of drifting away into memory I was choking and drowning in tea-soaked madeleines.

"I've been thinking," I said, ". . . about the way we've allowed things to . . . drift. I've been a fool to forget that I loved you. Love you . . . no, I never *forgot* that, but things got in the way. Let's ignore the last couple of weeks. It's just history, a little time in our lives. The arguments don't matter if we have each other."

She glanced back at me from the window as though she was coming back from another world. I checked my irritation. No rows, not this time.

"I'm a bit hung-over," she said. "Honesty time. I was pissed last night."

"With your friends."

She shrugged. "With people. They're not *you*, Dan, don't worry. I'd like to give things a chance, I really would, if we could get it back. When I saw you this morning, sitting in front of that damn screen of yours, it was—"

Her gaze went up. Something slapped my back.

"Dan! Mind if I join you?"

A chair rasped over from the nearest table before I could answer. Ritchie Hanks—one of the specialists who took care of the university mainframe—plonked his heavy, boyish self down.

He glanced at Marnie. I wasn't sure whether they'd ever met—my memory failing me again. There was a gratifying moment of hesitation, as the thought that maybe he'd interrupted something passed briefly in ones and zeros through Ritchie's computer-specialist's brain. But he wasn't easily put off when he had a story to tell about some fascinating new glitch he'd found in the system.

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We listened politely. I asked a few questions so that he could give the answers he wanted. Marnie was on her best behaviour: none of the sly asides that I'd found so amusing when I'd first known her but had since come to dread. None of that mattered, I told myself, not here in the past, not when I knew that Ritchie would have a private sector job on double the pay by the end of next year and I'd never think of him again, or whilst Marnie . . . but it did. Everything mattered.

"Anyway," I said, stopping him quickly before he began a different story. "I'd better be going now. Pressure of work, you know how it is."

"Sure, Dan. Pressure of work. Never stops, does it. I was only—"

"—that's right." I moved to stand. "Marnie, are you coming?"

"Well . . ." she hesitated and looked at me. Just her joke. Of *course* she'd come instead of staying with a prat like Ritchie. Wouldn't she?

She smiled. "I have some work to do. Us students have work too."

"Students," Ritchie said, as though it was a new concept. "Of course."

Marnie and I walked out into the cold air. Nothing had been decided. Nothing had changed.

Marnie shivered and pushed her hands into the pockets of her jacket. Her hair almost glittered in the sunlight. "It's true," she said. "I *do* have things to do. Tell you what, I'll come round your place tonight."

I nodded numbly. "What time?"

"Say . . . eight."

I nodded again.

"Ciao."

"Ciao."

She walked away from me. Above her winter boots and red socks were the bare backs of her knees. I wanted to kiss them and taste her skin. In my newly youthful body, the thought brought the odd and unaccustomed stirrings of an erection. It grew and then faded as she diminished in the slow drift of movement, as she became another figure, an artist's brushstroke to give these buildings a sense of scale.

Maybe I should have started earlier back. Perhaps that was part of the problem. Started back at the time when everything was fresh and new and right. But to do that, I would have had to go back to some misty and mythical place where Marnie wasn't Marnie and I wasn't me.

It was simply more complicated than that.

This was Marnie's second year at University. I'd seen her in the first year, of course; she was too pretty and . . . different not to be noticed. I think we might even have been to a couple of the same parties, not the student sort, but the ones around the chintzy academic fringes of the university where people dress up and pretend to stay sober, and start off talking about the Booker Prize and end up bitching about who's screwing

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whom. But Marnie didn't invite approaches, at least not from *me* she didn't.

She was twenty-four, a good three years older than the other undergrads. A *mature student*: how she hated that phrase. I suppose she was lonely in the way that older students always are, having to act as a shoulder to cry on, having to ignore or laugh along with the stupidities of her younger friends. She'd spent those extra years drifting in Europe, working as a nanny in Cannes, staying in some kibbutz, doing the sort of things that most people only talk about doing. I was seven years older, but I'd never really left school. She made me feel young, and she made me wonder just where and why and with whom she'd been doing all these things.

I only met her properly, face to face, when she took the computer graphics option in her second year. She didn't belong in the class. She was always sitting a little apart when I came in and the others looked up from their chatter. Marnie stood out in most situations. She just didn't belong. It was everything about her.

By the end of the second week, it was obvious that Marnie and computers weren't going to get on. There wasn't much to learn—the whole purpose of the course was, after all, to allow the students to put computers down on their CVs when they applied for those cherished jobs in design offices and advertising agencies—but even when she hit the right keys, things would go wrong. And after I'd cleared the screen of gibberish, and she'd punched the keys or prodded the light pen or rolled the mouse again, with a simple pessimism that was quite different from the manner of people who are genuinely computer-phobic, something *else* would go wrong instead. I'd never known anything like it. She nearly brought down the whole mainframe in the third week, something that was theoretically impossible from our access port and doubtless caused Ritchie and his colleagues no end of fascination.

I didn't mind at all. It gave me a legitimate excuse to spend most of the tutorials sitting next to Marnie, to lean close to her as we pondered the latest catastrophe, and to breathe her scent. I kept my eyes on the screen, but that was because I could see her reflection so clearly in the glass.

She gave me no particular signals. Of course, someone as lovely as Marnie gives signals to every man she passes, but that is merely God's unthinking blessing and curse. She dressed differently from the other students, usually in skirts and dresses rather than jeans. She had a striped blue-and-white cotton jacket that she wore when the weather was still mild early in the term that I fell in love with for some reason. She wore her hair long or in a bun. She smelt of acacia and cigarettes and Marnie. There was a slowness about the way she moved, a kind of res-

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ignation. She understood how she looked, but, unlike most beautiful women, she had a kind of confidence, but absolutely no pride.

I was attracted. I wanted to walk along sunset beaches with her. I wanted to talk through the night. I wanted to go to bed with her, and stay there a long, long time. I wanted my fill of Marnie, and I wasn't sure how much that could possibly be. The whole thing quickly got out of hand. I wanted her too badly to break the silence and risk rejection. And by the fifth week of term, I was being brusque and ignoring her in class and then replaying every word and look endlessly, even in my sleep. I was even beginning to wonder if it really *was* Marnie, or whether I was simply going a little mad.

Then I saw her one afternoon. I was killing time, wandering in the local botanical gardens, because the Chancellor's department had cocked-up the room allocation for my tutorial. The big tropical house was a common enough place for students to work, and it came as a bigger surprise than it should have to find her there, sitting with an easel beside the goldfish pool, filling in blocks of colour on a squared-off grid.

I said hello and she said hi. She was wearing a loose tee shirt, and I could see the curves of her shoulders and neck far more clearly than my fantasies had permitted. She seemed quite cheerful and relaxed. Marnie was, as I soon discovered, very partial to warmth, and very averse to the cold. A real hot-house flower. I sat down on the stone rim of the pond amid the bananas and rotting oranges and orchids, and we chatted. When I stood up for us to go down to the tea room by the pagoda, the backs of my trousers were soaking wet. We laughed about that, the first time we'd ever laughed together. When she pulled on her blue-and-white cotton jacket, her bare, downy arm brushed against my chest, and the feeling hit me like a huge, taut drum.

That was how it began. Now, with an afternoon to get through without her and only those odd, unsatisfactory words in the cafeteria to cling to, Marnie seemed almost as distant from me as she had all those years ahead, before I'd returned.

I spent the time wandering. I walked down to the botanical gardens, feeling more comfortable now with the undirected flood of traffic that growled past. This was, after all, my life. I had lived it. The eighties were as idiosyncratic as any other decade, but, at root, nothing was really that different from the true present. It was just a question of emphasis and style. Women pushed prams. Tramps mumbled. All the young people seemed to be plugged into those clumsy music players . . . Walkmans. They stared straight through you. Visitors from another planet. It reminded me of that Bradbury novel, all the people with shells in their ears. A helicopter chittered low and loud over the rooftops. No one looked up. And some of the new buildings looked as though they belonged on

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a moonbase. The future was already *here*. Of course, there were no silver air-cars or monorails, but, by now, people had realized that there never would be. Things would carry on pretty much as they had always done, and even the tantalizing fear of a black and glassy wasteland, the last of those great mid-century fantasies, was fading. These people pushing past and looking through me as they went about their busy, empty lives *knew* that nothing would ever really change. The holes in the sky would grow larger, and so would their flatter, squarer, sharper, deeper, thinner TV screens. And when the news slipped in between the commercials, the faces that peered out at them from those TV screens would still be ancient and hollow-eyed with starvation. The future was a fact that had arrived and had already been forgotten. It meant as much and as little to them as it would have done to their ancestors, dragging a plough or sheltering in a cave. They knew that what lay ahead was the same as now, only more so.

There were no students in the tropical house today. I drank my coffee in the tea room down by the bandstand alone.

Still not feeling up to risking myself and the Porsche, I took a bus into the centre of town. I still had some change in my pockets, but it was running down. I knew I had a card in my wallet, next to the last five pound note, that would get me money from one of the many cash machines. But, for all my research and revision, I had no idea what my PIN number was.

I made the mistake of sitting on the top deck of the bus, and the ragged movements and the unaccustomed cigarette fumes left me feeling a little sick by the time it finally jerked to a halt outside C&As.

The shops were a revelation. I would have loved to have taken some of this stuff back to the present with me. Condoms (and who could ever forget AIDS? Well, *I* had, for one). Organic vegetables. Newspapers with *real news* in them. Compact discs. Posters like wallpaper with the name of the artist printed at the bottom in huge type. Mrs. Thatcher mugs! I guess I just gawked. The store detectives watched me carefully as I picked up this and prodded that. It was just like a museum. They were the museum keepers, and didn't even know it!

The evening rush hour caught me unawares. Everybody was grim, moving all at once. I had to queue in the yellow streetlight to get a place on the bus, and then had to stand most of the way to my stop. It was cold as I walked the last half mile, and I was pondering whether I should give my central heating a call—before I remembered. The house was warm anyway, the timer set thoughtfully to come on in the evening.

I took a bath, feeling a little guilty about how much I'd unthinkingly enjoyed my Marnie-less tour of the local sights. But, by seven, I was

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waiting, anxiously clean and freshly clothed, not so much watching the TV as playing with the remote control.

Slices of the Channel Four News. Some quiz programme. An old Doris Day film. Top of the Pops. Top of the Pops was the most diverting (did Michael Jackson ever look *that* young?) but none of them held my attention for long. Soon, Marnie would be here. I planned on going out for a meal, maybe that Indian place just along the road, something ordinary and nostalgic, a place where we could sit in peaceful, candlelit anonymity and talk longingly. And then we'd walk back, hugging each other close against the cold, our frosty breath entwined in the streetlight, back to my house, to my bed.

Eight o'clock came and went. Marnie was always late, of course. I fixed myself a shot of Famous Grouse at half past, and then another at five to nine. All the usual questions and accusations were starting a headache hammer inside my head. I wandered around the house, looking at the wallpaper I'd chosen, the furniture and the things I hadn't seen in thirty years. Now, if I'd only kept that big plastic Fosters Lager ashtray that Marnie had smuggled out of the local wine bar under her coat and used to roll her joints. Somewhere along the years, it had departed from my life; exactly the sort of bric-a-brac that grew in value because no one thought anything of it at the time. There were a distressingly large number of things like that around the house. I'd been sitting on a gold mine, and I'd never realized it. And where the goddamned hell *was* she anyway?

Where was Marnie? At any moment since we'd become lovers, and even for some time before, that question was always somewhere in my thoughts. Another half hour, another whisky. I stood at the window and watched the empty pavement. I sat down and tried the TV again. I lay on the bed. I got up. I put the record player on. Old music for these old times. But the question followed me about, tapping at my shoulder, clutching at my elbow, whispering in my ear. What is she *doing*? She was with someone *else*, that was what. She'd never been faithful, not truly, not *faithful,* that was what.

I'd seen her walking the campus with another man the morning after the very first night we'd made love. I was still glowing. I sidled behind a tree. I watched them cross the wide and milling spaces. At the steps in front of the library she put her arms around him and laughed and gave him a quick kiss. She said he was just a student, when I quizzed her in the corridor as she came out from pottery, clay on her apron and hands and arms like the evidence of a crime, just someone she liked who had said something funny. Just another student. Snob that I was, that hurt more than anything. He was three years younger than her, for

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crissake! And when I followed him into the cafeteria for lunch, I saw that he had greasy hair and a fair sprinkling of zits.

Ten o'clock. She wasn't coming. No one, *absolutely no one*, let me down like this! And this wasn't the *first* time, either, oh no, she let me down all the time! No more whisky, I decided, having suddenly drunk myself up to some sort of calm plateau. Tonight might be a dead loss but there would be plenty of other times. Yes, plenty.

I pulled on a coat and went for a walk. I hadn't walked so much in one day for a long time. It was quiet now, the cars passed by in separate flashes of light. The big petrol station by the traffic lights glowed like a Spielberg spaceship. I headed down past the hospital towards Marnie's place. It was pure masochism, I knew I wouldn't find her there.

Architecturally, the big old houses on Westborne Road were similar to those of the sales directors and wine importers who lived around me, but here, a little further out of town, there were dirty net curtains at the windows and bedsit rows of bell buttons beside the doors.

Hers was the top window, set in a gable, with a wind-chime owl hanging from the casement in perpetual silence. I crunched up the worn tarmac drive, where a Morris Minor was parked beside a wheelless Triumph Herald up on bricks, and tried the buzzer anyway. A typed strip beside it had the name of the previous occupant, one R. Singh. Marnie never got around to changing anything. There was no reply. The shape of the stairs in the low-wattage light of the hall loomed through the coloured door-glass. I could smell cat's piss. A record player boomed faintly, deep inside. A man was laughing.

I stopped at the Ivy Bush on the way back, just in time for another drink. There was a traditional jazz band playing in the back room, but I stayed out of the noise in the flock wallpaper lounge. The publican recognized me and said hello. I nodded back, but his face was one that I had completely forgotten. Although I didn't feel particularly drunk, I had to fight back a strong urge to sit down on the spare chair facing those two elderly ladies and tell them that I'd come all the way from the future just for love. But common sense prevailed: Apart from anything else, they were probably quite used to those sort of conversations in this particular pub.

I got back to the house at about midnight, drank some more whisky, debating for a while the merits of taking it straight from the bottle, but deciding to keep with etiquette and use a tumbler, pulled off a representative assortment of clothes and flopped on the bed. The room spun a little, but not as much as I'd hoped. This young body could sure hold its drink.

Then the doorbell rang.

"You've got one sock off," Marnie said as she swaggered in.

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"You mean I've got one sock on."

She threw her coat over the stair rail. It slid to the floor. She'd been drinking too. She had a blue dress on underneath, one that showed her figure.

"What happened?" I asked, following her into the lounge.

She flopped down on the sofa, kicked off her shoes, put her feet up. "I tried to ring." She gazed at her toes.

"Sure. What time?"

"You don't believe me."

We were sparring, trying to find out who was more pissed. The things one does for love.

"I'd like a drink," she said.

"You've had enough."

"Look, Daniel," she said, switching off the booze in her brain just as she'd switched it on. "I'm sorry."

I poured us each a glass. She ignored it for a moment then took it and drank it with both hands.

"What time did you ring?"

"Is this a quiz? Do I get a prize?" She smiled. "Men look funny in shirts and underpants . . . and one sock. Put something on, Dan—or take something off."

"I've been waiting for you all night. What happened?"

"I rang you at ten. You weren't in then, were you? I tried earlier, but the box was vandalized and it stank. I'm truly sorry. It was my fault."

I sat down on the sofa by her feet. "Who were you with?"

So she began to tell me about the Visconti film she'd been to see at the arts centre that turned out to be a two part epic and how someone had given her a lift to the bus stop but then their car had broken down. I was angry-drunk, sure that reason and right were on my side, but there was an element of bitter comedy to this. I knew the story already. It was like watching an old series on TV and discovering that you're familiar with every twist and turn, that your brain had retained those meaningless facts for so many years. Why, I wondered, gazing at the lovely and abstract curves of Marnie's thighs where the dress had ridden up, hadn't I realized that this would be tonight? Her story stumbled on, an absurd, convoluted epic involving a pub and a wine bar and meeting up with a few more friends and the simple fact that she'd forgotten.

"Nothing's ever your fault," I said. "Nothing ever *was*."

Her eyes widened a little. "You almost sound like you mean that."

I wondered if I did. I finished my whisky and put it down. I waited for the room to settle. The dress had gone up and she'd made no effort to cover herself. Playing the whore, getting at me that way. It made me angry all over again to realize just how easily it worked.

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I took hold of her feet and massaged them, greedy for the feel of her flesh under the nylon.

"Do you forgive?" she asked, not wanting to be forgiven.

"Yes," I said, not meaning it, simply watching her body. Nothing had changed. We were back in the same old ways. The same tracks. The same dead end sidings. The past and the present had joined and now her skirt

now her skirt

rode higher and my hands touched the tension in her calves and thighs

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and up towards what was promised underneath, widening and sweeten-

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ing and sharpening to the place where everything was Marnie.

We showered separately afterwards to wash away some of the drink, and our guilt at using each other so easily. Nothing had changed. Sex with someone you can hardly talk to afterwards has to be a bad idea. So this was what I'd come all this way for. My Marnie. My love. She pulled back the shower curtains and stepped through the moist heat. There were droplets on her shoulders and face. Nothing had changed. Her hair was dark and smooth and wet, like a swimmer's.

We lay in the same bed through the grey night. Marnie breathed soft and heavy beside me. Sometimes, I remembered, I could talk to her when she was like this, find all the right words. But even that was gone. Nothing had changed, the only difference was that everything I did now reeked of falsity. I was a voyeur, staring out at my own life through keyhole eyes.

And I could press *return* at any time, clear the screen to end this absurd role-playing game. The thought was a bitter comfort, with Marnie so real and so distant beside me, and yet somehow it drew me into sleep, through the walls and into the sky and deep inside Marnie's eyes, where there was only the sparky darkness of electricity, circuitry, and machine power.

I awoke. The greyness was growing stronger with the winter dawn. My Marnie. The perfect, anonymous curves of wrist and back and cheekbone. The composure of sleep. I touched her skin gently, lovingly, and it rippled and broke. She rolled over and muttered something and stumbled out of bed to go to the loo.

The clock said seven thirty. I wanted to make love to her again, not really for the sex, but just to convince myself that she was real. But when she came back she began to collect her scattered clothes.

"God, I hate wearing yesterday's knickers."

"You should bring some of your stuff around here," I said, crossing my

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hands behind my head, "We could even try living together," pleased with myself at how easily I'd managed to slip that one through.

She gave me a be-serious look and pulled her slip on over her head. "Let's have breakfast. I could fix something."

"Something nice . . . ?"

"Goes without saying." She picked up her dress and gave it a shake. "I'm the perfect housewife."

Irritatingly fully dressed, she wafted out of the bedroom. I sat up and put my feet on the carpeted floor. I supposed the morning had to begin some time.

We faced each other across toast and boiled eggs at the breakfast table.

"What about living together?" I asked her again.

She looked wonderfully pretty with no make-up and her hair a mess. I wondered why women had never grasped the fact that men actually *preferred* them this way, without the paint and plastic.

She thwacked the top off her egg. "What about it?"

"Come on, Marnie." I tackled my own egg, tapping it gently around the sides. "I thought you were always saying you wanted to try anything new."

"Living together isn't new, Dan. We'd row too much. Look at us now. It's great when it's great, but it's like being on a roller coaster. And that wouldn't last for long."

"That's exactly my point," I said, keeping my voice smoothly reasonable and staring back at the watery ruin inside my egg. Marnie was a useless cook. "Things would get better."

"Dan, they would just get the same. You *know* that."

It was hard to stay in love with her for long when she was like this. Mulishly refusing to listen. Her sweet disorder was just an irritant. She was wearing that blue dress of the night before, that smelt of cigarettes and the places she'd been to and the people she'd been with. There was even a red wine stain just above her left breast. It was too easy to imagine some oaf mopping it for her.

"And exactly who *were* you with last night?"

"We've been through all that." She pushed away her plate and went in search of cigarettes. I followed her as she dug into her handbag and under cushions.

"You shouldn't smoke anyway," I said. "Look at you, you're a bloody addict."

"One more word," she said, "and I'm leaving. I don't *need* this first thing in the morning. I mean, come on, do *you*?"

But she didn't find her cigarettes, and I did say several more words. This was an easy row by our standards, kid's stuff. Marnie told me to go to hell and a few more places besides, and she used the F-word, which

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I never liked, especially from a woman. Then she grabbed up her coat and handbag and stormed out, banging the front door so hard that it bounced open again, letting in the cold of the morning. I had to go down the hall and shut it myself.

I poured out some more coffee in the kitchen, ignoring the yellow-eyed stare of the eggs. Until this moment, my body had somehow disregarded its shortage of sleep and excess of alcohol, but something had jogged its memory and now it was making up for lost time. I took the cup through to the lounge and dropped down into a chair, leaving the curtains closed. Marnie's cigarettes peeked out from underneath the dishevelled sofa. I stared at them. What *was* it about being in love with her? I was acting like a robot, as though I had no free will.

Something would have to change. The thought kept recurring over the next two days as Marnie and I avoided each other, just as we had done before, just as we always did, playing the game of pride, pretending that an acknowledgement of the fact that we needed each other would be a sign of weakness. Something would have to change. Everything was just the same. A petite Taiwanese student had a nosebleed in one of my classes. I got a letter from my parents telling me that old Uncle Derek was in a bad way from a stroke. I broke one of my heavy Waterford whisky glasses and cut my finger when I was washing up. The passage of these days, it seemed, had been pegged out by accidents and misfortunes.

But life had its compensations. I spent a lovely lecture-free Friday morning taking the Porsche up and down the close and along the local roads, just to get the feel of it again. As with everything else, it was really just a matter of letting my subconscious take over. The Porsche obeyed my commands promptly and politely, its great engine purring like an eager-to-please cat. Inside there was still that beautiful smell you got from cars in those days. The whole feel of it was nice, precise. For the first time since I'd returned, I felt as though I was really in command. Around lunchtime, I went for a longer drive, risking the traffic and finding that, with the Porsche, I had nothing to fear. We all used to take driving for granted, but in the right car it could be a real pleasure: the Porsche was the right car.

My route took me through the fringes of a highrise slum, the Porsche as strange as a spaceship in this land of the dog turd and the abandoned mattress. I turned gratefully back towards the bright and busy hive of the university, along Westborne Road, under the tree shadows, past the big old houses. And there, quite by chance, was Marnie, walking and talking between two men.

I slowed the Porsche to a smooth walking pace and buttoned the window down.

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"Fancy a lift, Marnie?"

"Okay," she said, without an ounce of hesitation. I unclicked the door and she slipped elegantly into the bucket seat. I exchanged a look with the two scruff postgrads she'd been walking with. Sorry, lads.

We zoomed off.

"I've just been driving around this morning," I said. "I'd forgotten how good the Porsche was."

She laughed. "How can you forget a thing like this? It takes half your salary."

"You like it?"

"Of course I do. It's just a car, but it's a nice car. Why do you have to keep asking people these things? It's like you don't believe them yourself."

I shook my head, shrugged. I touched the brake and the car rooted itself to the line of a junction.

"Last night, whenever it was," she said. "I don't blame you for being angry when I was late. It's just that everything gets so *big* with you and me. When you're sweet, Dan, everything's fine, but we always seem to be looking for ways to hurt each other."

"I've been trying to think what to say," I said. "Really, Marnie . . . I'm sorry, too." Sincerity was always easier when you were driving.

I flashed my pass at the security guard at the east gate. I parked in my usual place by the arts faculty.

She slammed the passenger door.

"Careful," I said.

"Careful's my middle name."

"Come round tonight," I said to her across the Porsche's roof. "It doesn't matter what time. And we'll sleep together and when we wake up on Saturday, whenever, we'll go somewhere in this car. A day out, you and me."

She smiled, her perfect face reflected in the perfect, glossy black. "That sounds nice."

Deeply in love, I watched her walk away. She gave me a backwards wave over her shoulder. My Marnie, my one and only.

Because I hadn't stipulated early, the doorbell rang just after six. Marnie stood framed in the light from the hall against the winter black, wearing a tartan shawl and a waxed cotton jacket, carrying her overnight bag.

"Let me help you with that," I said, ever the kindly host.

I dumped her bag by the telephone in the hall and swung the door shut with my foot. Helping her off with her jacket, my hands strayed from her shoulders, spoilt for choice between the curves of her breasts and her lovely behind. She turned and pushed herself against me. Our mouths

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locked, greedily exchanging breath and saliva. We were half undressed by the time we managed to get up the stairs. Marnie bounced onto the bed, sitting up to undo the remaining buttons of her blouse.

"No," I said, struggling to take off my watch and socks at the same time. "I'll do that. I'll do everything."

We went for a meal later at the nearby Indian restaurant. It was a regular place of ours. The waiters gave us the best table, away from the toilets and the door to the street. I'd managed to get some cash by writing a cheque at the bank, but my recollection of prices was still vague, and even though Marnie always insisted on paying her share, I wasn't sure whether I'd have enough for the meal and to see us through the weekend. When we sat down, I asked Marnie if they'd accept Visa.

"We always pay that way here," she said, pulling her chair in. "You're very forgetful lately."

"You're too much of a distraction."

"Let's see now." She reached across the pink tablecloth and took my hand. She was achingly beautiful in the candlelight. "You tell me who the Chancellor of the Exchequer is."

I went cold. I didn't have the faintest idea. Antony Barber? Too early. Dennis Healey? No, Labor. Then who?

Her golden-lit eyes saw through me for a moment.

I felt as though I wasn't there.

"Time's up," she said, letting go of my hand.

The waiter came over with the menus. In the brief distraction, I remembered. But it was too late to say.

"I'm sorry," I said, studying the long lists of kormas and tandoori dishes to avoid meeting her eyes. "I've been feeling a bit odd lately. You've obviously noticed. Maybe I should see a doctor." I tried a laugh. "Or a psychiatrist."

It was the only fragile moment in an otherwise perfect evening. We got merry on house red. I asked her about her name, just as I'd done all those years before, and she admitted that, yes, her mother really *had* got it from that Hitchcock movie. Not even a particularly *good* Hitchcock movie, she added, her eyes dropping towards the candlewax and poppadum crumbs. I took her hand and kissed her palm and held it tenderly against my cheek.

Underneath all the looks and all the laughter and all the friends she had, Marnie was vulnerable. There was no doubt about it. Sitting talking or not talking, simply gazing at her, I could also feel my own barriers slipping down. We were so different, so alike: disappointed with a world that had given us many of the things we didn't want and held out on the few we really desired. Between the two of us there was *something*. Like looking in a mirror, it was both a separation and a sharing, a glassy edge

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between us on which we tried to balance our love. In later years, of course, I romanticized her, idealized her, but now, being with her again, sharing the thoughts and looks and words and silences, of that best kind that you can never recall afterwards, I lost any remaining doubts about our love being ordinary, or even a passing obsession. I *loved her.* This was, for once in my life, totally and completely real.

We walked home, hugging each other close against the cold, our frosty breath entwined in the streetlight.

The perfect evening was followed by a perfect night. Everything we did we did slowly, heavily blurred with love. We kissed each other through the edges of sleep. Once, deep in the night, she began to shiver, although it wasn't from the cold. I held her tight until she was still, as I had done before.

"Help me, Dan," she whispered from inside. "Love me."

The dream flowed into the dreamy morning. Bringing coffee to our bed, I could hardly believe that it was this simple and natural to be in love. With the curtains open so we could see the trees and the sky, we sat close under the comforter and debated over a map where we might go. We settled on wherever the roads took us.

I rolled the Porsche proudly out of the garage through a romantic mist of exhaust. My lovely car; it seemed right that it should share our lovely day. I was grinning stupidly, a kid at Christmas. I felt like laughing at the thought of how hard I'd tried to find the *words* when I'd first returned to Marnie, when all that mattered really was being like this. Together.

I even trusted her to drive for a while, once we were safely out on the country roads. She grated the gears a couple of times, but I managed to keep quiet: no damage was done, and she understood the need to be delicately careful. We swapped back over. It was a wonderful feeling to be driving in this car, with a beautiful woman beside me and nothing but ourselves to fill the day, and the bare trees reaching over the roads, their clawed reflections sweeping the wide hood. We stopped at a country pub and sat in old leather chairs beneath the beams and in the firelight, sipping salty, hoppy beer. They were already playing Christmas tunes on the jukebox, and we talked about where we would go together then. Somewhere with mountains and snow.

Marnie peeled the print off a beer mat and sketched a picture of me with a biro. When she handed it over, I saw that it was as good as it had always been, a little too accurate for me to appreciate, maybe; a few quick and easy strokes that said things that those old, cold photographs never had. The only difference now was that the card of the mat was softly white again, instead of the yellowed memento I was more used to. Marnie's work was always at its best when she wasn't concentrating or trying. She wasn't really an artist. She had talent, but she was too busy

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coping with life to turn it into much. She would never have become any kind of artist or designer.

On our way out through the deserted benches of the pub garden, Marnie sat down on the kiddie's wooden swing, not caring about the lichen and moss. She tilted her legs and I pushed her back and forth. The publican came out to bring a barrel up from the cellar. I expected him to tell us to get the hell off, but he just looked and smiled oddly at us, like a man who realises he's lost something.

As we drove on, Marnie told me about a day when she was a child, when it was summer and her father was still alive. He'd pushed her on a creaky swing into the hot sky. He had a tweed jacket that smelt of pipe tobacco and that itched when he hugged her. There were shimmering trees and a lake and a big house of white stone.

"I wish I could find out where that place was," she said. "Just in the past, I guess."

I parked the Porsche under the trees in a country lane. A quiet place. A pretty, nowhere place. The sky was thickly grey. Everything was shadowed and soft, like a room with the curtains drawn. We walked on between the dark hedgerows.

A sign pointed across the fields towards a landmark hill. We followed the track, keeping to the grassy sides to avoid the worst of the mud. A flock of swans flew silently over. Their whiteness seemed to make them ghostly creatures from another world.

Standing at the grassy top of the hill, the whole of a county was spread around us. The grey of the city to the north. Villages and towns. Trees and fields dark with winter. A toy van travelling down a toy road. A big reservoir: tarnished silver, then suddenly bright in the ripples from a breeze that soon touched our faces with cold.

"We haven't *done* anything today," I said.

"That's what's been so good." Marnie hugged me. I could feel the soft pressure of her breasts. "I'd like to have another day like this, please."

"I'd like to have another day like this, please."

I couldn't bring myself to reply.

She let go. "What is it, Dan?"

I shrugged. "Just . . . talking about the future."

"You should know the future never comes."

What was I supposed to do? Nothing had changed. This day. This hill. These words. Marnie. Me.

"What shall we do tonight?" I asked.

"What shall we do tonight?" I asked.

"I'll have to go back to my flat."

"I'll have to go back to my flat."

I nodded, trying very hard to picture her in that cold and empty room,

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with the half-finished paintings, the drooping rubber plant in the corner, the owl wind-chime silent at the window.

"I promised to see some people," she said. "A sort of party. Come along with me. It'll be fun."

"It doesn't matter what I say, does it?"

"Don't be like that. Please."

We walked back to the Porsche in our own puzzled and separate silences. It was waiting under the trees, looking like something out of a calendar or a magazine. Marnie climbed inside and lit a cigarette, exhaling a cloud against the dashboard and windscreen.

"Couldn't you have done that when you were outside?" I said thickly.

She took another drag. "It's too cold out there, Dan. It'll go when we get moving. . . ." She gave me a pitying look. Poor Daniel, the look said, to be bothered by such an absurd little thing. In truth, I wasn't bothered, as I had been before. But it was too late to change things.

Marnie shivered. "Can't we just get going? I'm cold. I've been cold all day."

Cold all day.

Cold all day.

I gripped the steering wheel hard. "I thought we'd been happy. I thought today was special . . . So special you won't even bloody well stay with me tonight!"

"It *has* been special," she said. She opened the ashtray on the dash between us and maneuvered her cigarette towards it. But the ash fell on the black carpet beside the gearbox. She gave it a careless brush, as though that was enough. "I've just been a bit . . . chilly. You know how I am."

The inside of the car was thick with smoke. I clicked the ignition key on a turn and pressed the master button that brought both of the windows down. "Why the hell do you have to smoke in here?" I said over the gentle buzz of the window motors. "Especially when we're trying to talk?"

She laughed, or attempted to. I think she was already starting to cry. "You call this *talking*? All that bothers you is me smoking in this precious bloody car of yours. Marnie messing up your pretty images of the way everything *should* be. Marnie smoking. Marnie drinking. Marnie actually sometimes wanting to be with people *other than you*. When all *you* want is some woman to sit by you in this bloody, *bloody* car! It's that simple, isn't it?"

I gripped the steering wheel. I said nothing. There was no point.

"Why don't you just fuck off," she said childishly, childishly stubbing the cigarette out on my carpet, getting out of the Porsche, childishly slamming the door.

I got out on my side. She was standing there beneath the big oak tree,

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with the placid winter countryside all around us, as though none of this was happening.

"If you could see yourself," I said. "How stupid this is."

"Of *course* it's stupid! We're having a *stupid argument*. Or perhaps you hadn't noticed?"

"Why?" I asked reasonably.

"Everything has to be so *personal* with you," she said, breathing in and out in shudders, her face puffed with ugly tears. "That bloody car of yours! This was a lovely day until you ruined it."

"I want you to respect me . . . respect my property."

"Your *property*!" Now she was yelling. The sound was unnatural, unwomanly. I'd never seen her this angry before.

I'd never seen her this angry before.

"Just listen. . . ."

I stepped towards her. She pushed me away and stumbled over to the car.

"You deserve this—" she was shouting through the thickness of her tears. "—You really do. You bastard! Your property! You do deserve this. I love you, you bastard. I'm not. Your property. *Fuck you*. I hope you never—"

I watched her fumble open the driver's door. She started the Porsche with the accelerator floored and the gears in reverse. The engine howled, and the car gave a juddering leap backwards into a tree. The bumper crunched, shivering leaves and scraps of bark through swirls of exhaust. Marnie knocked the wiper stalk as she screeched into first. The blades flicked to and fro. Then she pulled away, the fat tyres kicking up a shower of mud and leafmold; a rich, incongruous scent amid the drifting reek of the petrol.

The engine roar faded into silence. I looked at my watch; almost four o'clock. I began to walk back along the road towards the nearest village. I knew the way: right at the crossroads and straight ahead after that. I was even able to save myself a mile's pointless detour down a badly signed road that petered out to a farm track, but it was still deep twilight, and my shoes were pinching badly by the time I reached the village green and used the phonebox to call for a cab. I waited shivering outside. There were trees and chimneys and a church spire in silhouette against a grainy sky, warmly lit leaded windows in the houses, two ducks circling in the dim pond. The whole scene was heavy with nostalgia for times much earlier than these, the wholesome wood-scented, apple-scented, sunset-coloured days that had never been.

The cab came quickly. Questing headlights swung towards me across the crumbling churchyard wall. It was a Japanese car, I think, not the sort of car that had a real name that anyone remembers. A functional

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box on wheels. I asked the driver to take me to the nearest town; I didn't bother to explain. I knew that he would perform his role well enough in silence, just as he had done before.

The shops were shut, and the main car park around the big war memorial where he dropped me off was almost empty. No use offering Visa. I paid the fare without a tip. I was left with exactly forty-nine pence in my pockets. A cold wind was starting. A few cans rattled and chimed across the streetlit tarmac.

The police station was on a side road at the back of Woolworths. An old man backing out through the doors with his dog gave me a weary, sharing smile. I told the duty constable at the counter that an acquaintance had driven my car away without permission. I didn't think they were insured. I told him the car was a Porsche. Unimpressed, he nodded towards the empty plastic benches by the doors and told me to wait.

I sat down. Like the few other police stations I've been inside, this one was absurdly quiet, as though it had been waiting for greying, paint-peeling years for something to happen. Something to make up for all the drunks, and all the people like me. I studied the curling posters on the notice board opposite. Oddly, I couldn't remember any of them. I wondered vaguely, irrationally, if that was somehow a sign that things would end up differently.

Two sergeants came out from a room at the back. They flipped up the side of the counter. Before they spoke, I knew from their faces that it had happened. I wondered if this was the time to end it, but part of me wanted to see it again. To be certain.

They drove me to the reservoir. There was a noisy crane there already, and floodlights probing thick yellow shafts into the water. Men in uniforms peered down from the roadside. People were gathering around the fringes of the darkness to watch. One of the sergeants leaned over to the back seat before we stepped out of the car and asked me if I thought it was an accident; just the sort of casual question they try on you before you've had time to put your guard up.

"I used to think so," I said, not caring what they made of it. "But now I don't know. I'm not sure."

The Porsche looked like a big, black crab as it broke the surface. It rose into the harsh light, water sluicing out of it in glittering curves. People *oohed* and *aahed*. Chains tensed and screamed with the car's weight. The air filled with the smell of green mud, like a bad beach at low tide. The crane paused for a moment, a big insect hesitating with its prey, then swung the car down onto the road. The suspension broke with twig-like snaps. The car was still wet and heavy, dark pools sliding across the verge and down the bank, running eagerly back into the reservoir. Sleepwalking figures broke the door open, and there was a

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thick rush of mud before they lifted Marnie out. No one hurried. I didn't envy the police their job.

They asked me if it was her. Just confirmation, for the record. I walked through to the front, where an ambulance stood with its lights uselessly circling and its doors uselessly open. A man in a wetsuit pushed past me, wiping something from his hands. They'd just left her on the road. No point in messing the blankets. Her head was turned away, an abstract curve of neck and cheekbone. Her skin was glossy white, and her hair was dark and smooth and wet. Like a swimmer's. I nodded, but this wasn't *my* Marnie, my one and only, the woman I loved.

I stepped back, away from the flashlights and the floodlights and the spinning blue lights and the people. The time had come, there was no point in going any further. Somewhere from the machine darkness, I would have to summon the will to try again. Try again. Press Return. I let the images and sensations fade, the sounds, the sights, the smells.

There *will* be another time, Marnie. A better time than this, believe me. I promise.

I promise. ●

Night Watch

For Ann

The wind sighs
the rise and
fall
of your breasts
in the darkness
of your hair
moons rise
and stars
move
in the firmament
of your eyes
I watch for meteors

—Roger Dutcher

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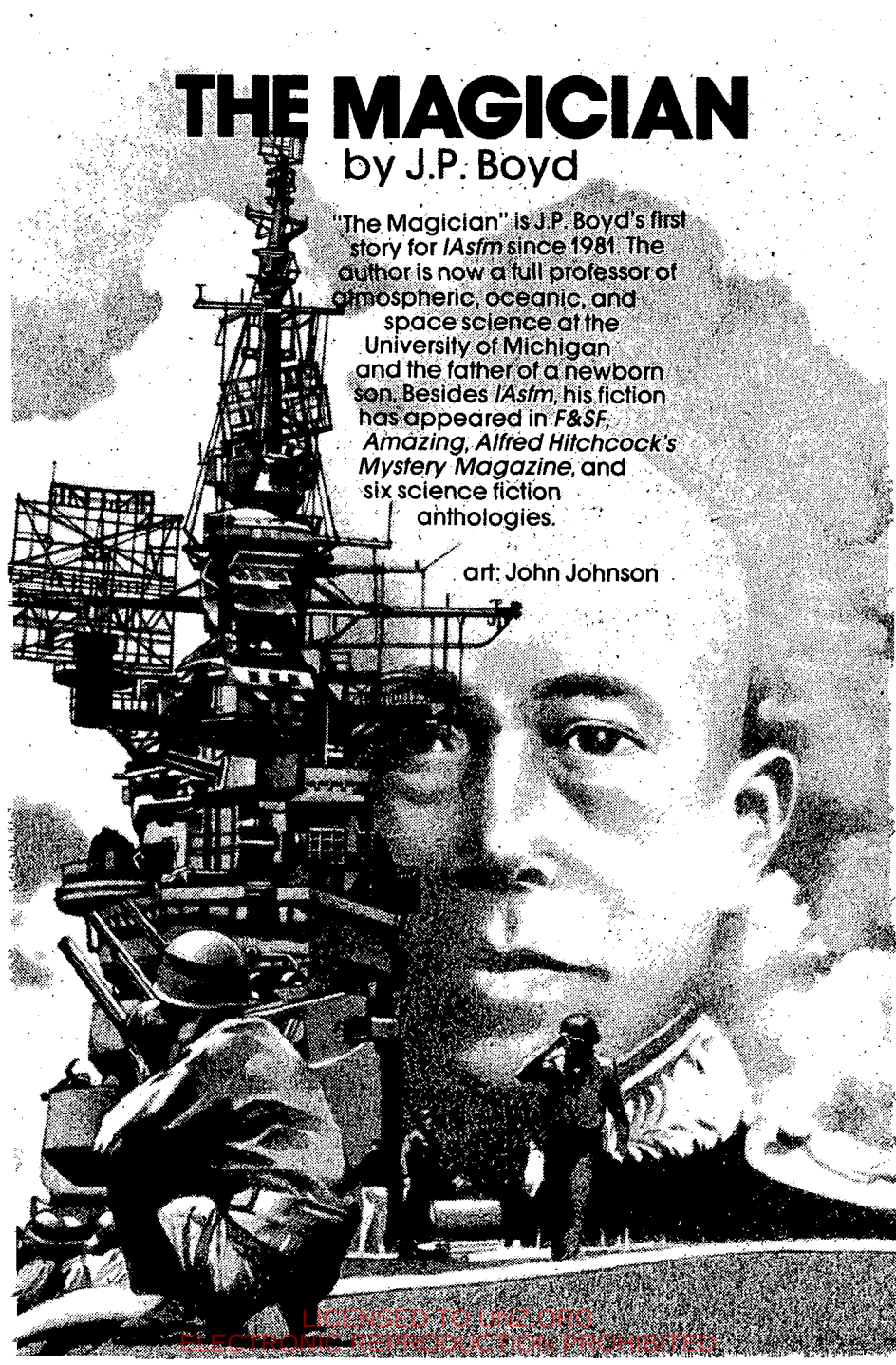
THE MAGICIAN

by J.P. Boyd

"The Magician" is J.P. Boyd's first story for *IAsfm* since 1981. The author is now a full professor of atmospheric, oceanic, and space science at the University of Michigan and the father of a newborn son. Besides *IAsfm*, his fiction has appeared in *F&SF*, *Amazing*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and six science fiction anthologies.

art: John Johnson



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In the conning tower of the battleship *Yamato,* a small, eight-fingered man sat in a steel chair, his eyes closed. A vast armada of aircraft carriers, dreadnoughts, and support ships pounded through the dawn seas toward Seattle, linked to him through threads of command as slender and invisible as white spider steel, as strong as the 2600 years of the Japanese Empire. Three months earlier, his carrier strikes had crushed the American battleships like a giant's fist, hammering Pearl Harbor. Even so, he had known the war was unwinnable. And so, he had thrown his whole strength across Magellan's moat to rattle his winged sabers under the very barbicans and watchtowers of the American island. He was very tired.

The eight-fingered man was called Isoroku Yamamoto, but a name was a luxury he had never been permitted. "Isoroku" is the numeral "56," for he had born in the fifty-sixth year of his father's long and unimaginative life. His birth surname of Tadano had been cast aside, like his innocence, when he humored his family by accepting adoption into the great Yamamoto clan, the lords of the western mountains. By then he was a thirty-two-year-old commander, and the first two fingers of his left hand were long missing. They had been shaved off just above the knuckles by a fragment of shell during the Battle of Tsushima when Japan destroyed the Russian navy and became a world power.

He had proudly sent his mother a handkerchief soaked in his own blood. "I am the sword of my emperor," he often said. But then he had only maimed his body. Now, he had to send thousands of other young boys to their deaths, to use Konichi to provoke a war with Germany, to spin a web of illusions over the western Allies. To maim his integrity.

How different it might have been if he had never been to Franklin! When his whole heart should be with the fliers, he could not keep his mind off the enemy he had betrayed. His friend.

Through the open battle shutters, he sensed the change in course. He opened his eyes for a moment, and saw the *Akagi* turning into the wind to launch her planes. He had commanded her when he was younger. He closed his eyes again and remembered.

As dawn came, a deck crowded with planes was silent except for the sea and the aircrew scrambling into their mounts. Then the engines starting, one by one, until the carrier was a madhouse of roaring engines, the smell of burning oil, the airedales kneeling by the wheel cocks. Then the stiff crack of the signal flags, and the first fighter rolling down the wooden deck. Slowly at first, then faster and faster until its tail rose. And then that breathtaking moment when two tons of aluminum floated down from the lip of the deck, as soft as a sinking dandelion, before hanging just above the wind-chopped whitecaps, and then slowly climbing out sunward into its true element.

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"The fighters have launched, sir. Now, the torpedo-planes."

The admiral nodded. Three-seaters, called Kates by the Allies. On a normal strike, torpedoes would hang beneath them, but today many would be carrying bombs. And then the Aichi dive-bombers. Slower than the Kates and Zeros, betraying their age through the metal spats that covered their unretractable wheels. But the Vals were good planes nonetheless.

"I envy you, Admiral!"

Yamamoto opened his eyes and saw the Kriegsmarine liaison officer, Fregatten-Kapitan Grassman, standing in front of him. He rather liked the German, a tall old man who'd had to swim for it when his cruiser had been torpedoed in the Battle of Jutland a quarter of a century earlier. But Grassman's freedom was a vivid reminder that Konichi had failed, and was dying in a Tokyo hospital for nothing.

Yamamoto closed his eyes again.

"May I say again how deeply sorry I am for the U-89 crew—"

The eight-fingered man sensed Grassman's fear, and hid a smile. The German, though middle-aged and white-haired, was still spare and vigorous and a foot taller than the man he feared. Nevertheless, it was a miracle that Grassman was still an ally and not a prisoner.

He said, "My government has accepted the Navy Minister's apology. My former aide, Lt. Commander Konichi, will probably not survive. It has only been two days—but when the survival of the Empire is at stake, we cannot take time to grieve. Please do not speak of this again."

Grassman nodded, and Yamamoto closed his eyes again as they filled with tears. Fourteen Japanese dead, along with almost the entire crew of the German submarine, which had been visiting Tokyo to bring technology for sharing, and diplomatic papers to cement the alliance.

He touched his pocket and felt the little black book. His geisha, Kikuchi, maddened with jealousy, had once stolen it from him, assuming it contained the names of his other girlfriends. In reality, it was only a roster of the men who had died under his command, beginning almost twenty years earlier when he had been promoted to command the Kasumigara Naval Air Station. He no longer kept it up; there were so many names now that he could not have listed them all if he had written day and night for every hour of the war. Yet it comforted him, somehow, to know that he had tried to be careful. To make death matter.

Grassman tried to break the long waiting with the question. "Have you ever been to the United States?"

Yamamoto nodded, remembering his friend, but he kept his eyes closed, thinking only of his airmen dying over Puget Sound. And, when he was very weary, of the American he had betrayed.

* * *

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Yamamoto first came to America with the fleet in 1910, and then studied the economics of oil for two years at Harvard just after the end of the first World War. During his graduate work, he had developed an appreciation for the military importance of industrial base and economics that was highly unusual for an officer of his time. Trying to inspect the Mexican oil fields first hand while sleeping in flop-houses and living mostly on bread and bananas, he had been arrested for vagrancy, and the embassy in Washington had been forced to bail him out. Even so and despite the long separations from his family, who never left Tokyo, he had enjoyed his years in North America. And from his fellow graduate students at Harvard, he had learned poker, that game of luck and strategy that would become a life-long obsession.

The friendship that meant so much to him, however, began only during his tour as naval attaché from 1925–1927. He had discovered American baseball during his years in Cambridge, and never missed a Washington Senators game.

One warm day in June, he was munching contentedly on a bag of peanuts, now able to afford at least a few small luxuries after being poor well into young manhood. He enjoyed batting practice almost as much as the game because the slowly filling stadium was comparatively quiet and uncrowded, and he felt at peace. A booming voice called to him from several sections away: "Captain Yamamoto?"

The future admiral came out of his reverie and sat up. Yamamoto was disguised in a stylish western suit but there were, he supposed, very few Japanese in Washington. He recognized the tall man picking his way towards him as an officer he had met at an embassy reception a couple of weeks earlier.

"Commander Cleburne. I'm an aide to—"

"Yes, yes, of course." Yamamoto spoke with a thick accent, but he had considered it almost a religious duty to see the country and mingle with its inhabitants during his years at Harvard, and he could make himself understood.

As the American dropped into the empty seat beside him, he asked, "Did you play ball yourself, in Japan?"

Yamamoto smiled. "Yes. I wrote articles for the school newspaper, too. My rank in class dropped from first to sixteenth. But I did not have enough time to become good. My father was headmaster in a fishing port on western coast. Snow fell, as much as fifteen feet in winter. He could not afford textbooks, so I had to copy them by hand. There was no time."

Cleburne looked embarrassed. "It was different in Virginia. The winters are mild, and I grew up playing ball every afternoon. When I was seventeen, a scout came to watch me pitch, and I dreamed of being in the big leagues."

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The summer he was seventeen, Yamamoto had lived with the other cadets in a tent on Miyajima Island, forbidden to wear anything but a swimsuit. They swam three hours a day, and at the end of the summer, swam the ten miles back to Etajima in formation. Thirteen hours in the water.

Remembering, he was suddenly angry at the contrast between this giant beside him and his own puny frame. Even in middle-age, he weighed only 135 pounds. As a child, his normal food had been a small bowl of rice with an occasional radish or eggplant. On Sundays, his family would catch salmon in the mountain streams and pick mushrooms. How could he compete with these Americans who ate meat every day?

Behind an impassive face and polite small talk, he fumed until Cleburne disappeared in the fourth inning to treat him to a hot dog. Then Yamamoto's basic good nature asserted itself. To Cleburne, after all, he was a stranger, an enemy, a man of another race. Why should this hulking commander bother even to wave to him? And yet this blue-eyed giant had gone out of his way to make him feel at home in an alien country.

Feeling much ashamed, Yamamoto accepted the hot dog with thanks. "My name is Isoroku."

"Mine is Bob. We should do this again sometime soon."

The captain nodded, and this strange genial man with pale eyes and light skin became his deepest friend. The one he would betray.

After the planes returned from the first strike, the conning tower had been filled with congratulations, yes, even a toast. A squadron of four-engined B-17's had bombed the first Carrier Division from more than three miles up, and raised nothing but great, harmless gouts of water between the twisting ships. Half a dozen twin-engined Catalina flying boats, armed with torpedoes slung under each wing, had tried to hide in the low-hanging clouds, but the fighter cap had found them almost the instant they dropped down to wave height to look for the enemy. Five splashed, and the sixth disappeared into the clouds with a burning engine.

Grassman was as jubilant as Flag Captain Yoshino, but Yamamoto was worried. "It has been too easy. Even taking the northern route, close to Alaska, they must have seen us. A submarine, a flying boat from the Aleutians." Nevertheless, after a feint northward, he gave the order to reverse course during the night to launch a second strike at San Francisco.

At ten o'clock, more than a hundred planes from the American carriers *Hornet, Yorktown,* and *Enterprise* materialized while the decks of the six Japanese fleet carriers were clogged with Kates and Vals, launching the

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strike. Yamamoto had led his fleet into the greatest ambush in three millennia of sea-fights.

A few months before Pearl Harbor, the Americans had cracked the Japanese Purple code. Because of the frequently changed keys, they never read more than 10 percent to 15 percent of the radio traffic. Too little to identify the precise date or target of the attacks in those first days of the war. But this time, Joe Rochefort and his wizards had seen enough glints of light in the shadows to know that the Imperial Navy intended to attack America. And not immediately turn away.

The clumsy Douglas Devastator torpedo bombers were massacred by antiaircraft fire and the Zeros. The torpedo planes had to fly just above the waves, long and straight, or their fragile weapons would break their backs when dropped into the sea. Afterward, the fleet claimed at least thirty kills, and only a couple of torpedoes hit. A destroyer was the only casualty.

Four miles up, however, the American Wildcats broke up the fighter cap, and forty dive bombers picked their targets, lined up, and dove. When their bombs whistled downward, they landed on flight decks crowded with fuel-and-bomb-heavy planes. Each blast set off a chain reaction of fire and explosion. Many airedales were blown overboard, and the few survivors, burned and gagging on the thick smoke, could not push the flaming planes over the side fast enough to contain the devastation.

An hour later, when the *Akagi* erupted in a great fireball a thousand feet high and then disappeared behind a thick, impenetrable cloud of smoke, Grassman lowered his glasses and said, "Your ship—"

Yamamoto lowered his binoculars and nodded. The blast, probably of bombs and torpedoes strewn around the hanger deck, had surely broken *Akagi's* back. He said to himself, "I am the sword of my Emperor."

But Hirohito had not wanted this war. In September, the day the military oligarchs had announced the decision for war, he had read a poem to the imperial council. "All the seas everywhere are brothers."

"I didn't want it either," he murmured. Grassman looked at him queerly, and Yamamoto put the binoculars to his eyes to hide his pain. The Naval Staff had sent him to sea as Commander-in-Chief in 1939, partly to get him out of the way of assassins! That was the way of things in Japan these days. Treachery and the knife.

Out of the corner of his eye, he looked at the German. He thought, I loathe the Nazis and have never trusted them, but is my own country better? Army hotheads invaded Manchuria without orders. The prime minister himself was murdered in 1932 because he was against war with China. The finance minister and former prime minister Viscount Saito had died in the 2-26 incident four years later. The new prime minister

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had survived that coup only by hiding under the soiled laundry in his own house.

The *Yamato* turned sharply to put up a curtain of fire around the beleaguered *Kaga*. Yamamoto staggered, lowered his glasses and thought of Konichi. In the name of the Emperor, he had led a mob from the battleship *Kongo* against the U-89 crewmen in a Tokyo bar. "To avenge the terrible insult to the Emperor," he had told them. Of course, it was all lies. All deception.

A bomb exploded on *Kaga's* fantail, then a burning plane tumbled over the side and cartwheeled onto its back before it hit and exploded. All lies and deception. Like this whole mission

"I have lied even to my own men," he thought. About why he had brought them here, refueling twice, dipping deep into the Empire's rapidly thinning oil reserves. About what he had really hoped to accomplish. About what he had learned at Franklin.

The spray of bullets shattered his reverie. Even in battle, the steel shutters on the conning tower were never closed. Tradition, as inexorable as duty. Officers must not shirk danger when the men were crouched at open, unprotected anti-aircraft mounts. He was told, much later, it was a strafing Wildcat.

One moment he was looking through his glasses at *Kaga*. The next, Yamamoto was on his back, dazed. He had heard nothing, seen nothing, but there was a terrible pain in his side.

The bullet had been a ricochet, or the shock would have killed him instantly and torn his flesh like a cannon round. As he rolled onto his side, however, he saw that the others had not been so lucky.

The fleet engineer, Captain Yugiri, had been almost decapitated. *Yamato's* captain was dead, too, with two great bloody holes in his chest. The signals lieutenant, his petty officers, Grassman—dead, all dead.

Yamamoto's aide, Lt. Abe, returned from his errand to the gunnery plot and found a charnel house. "Admiral! Admiral!"

"Fetch the surgeon. And tell Commander Takani he has the ship."

He refused to be taken to his cabin, but was strapped into his chair. For the next twenty-four hours, he fought the great running battle the Americans called The Battle of the Golden Gate. The unromantic reality was that his fleet was never nearer than one hundred and fifty miles to the inland sea known as San Francisco Bay. He lost four carriers, but a last daring attack from *Hiryu* and *Shokaku* had cost the Americans their second carrier, and disabled the late-arriving *Lexington*.

Wounded, he still gave the order to turn *Yamato* away from the van to keep its solitary rendezvous with a fleet tanker far to the south. He was thinking of poker, and those all-night games at Harvard, when his aide came to wake him.

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"We're at war with Germany, sir."

Yamamoto, who had half-drifted off in spite of his tension, said groggily, "Why?"

"I don't know. Perhaps the Emperor was not satisfied."

Yamamoto put his head on his hands and gave silent thanks. Five days before Pearl Harbor, he had had a *pro forma* audience with the Emperor to receive the Imperial Will. Which was not really the will of either the Emperor or the Admiral. But he had given the Emperor a book on his great love, marine biology, with an insert of extracts from *Mein Kampf*, translated from the German by Konichi. "When the hour comes, you will know how to use this hate. Someday, Hitler will come for us, too, as he already has come for the Jews and the Slavs."

Hirohito could never have openly defied Tojo and the other generals. He had been under *de facto* house arrest for half a dozen years. But he had chosen his moment.

Bob Cleburne dangled his long legs over the edge of the porch at Carnton house in Franklin, Tennessee while Yamamoto walked in the Confederate cemetery that filled the whole hillside sloping down from the brick manse. He called up, "And you say it was not a particularly big battle?"

Cleburne shook his head. "No. John Schofield lost 2500 men. Wagner's brigades were too far out in front of the breastworks, the rebels came on too hard. Schofield had blundered. But he had dug in well, and knew what to expect. Hood's mistake in attacking such a strongly fortified position was much more serious. He lost more than 6,000."

"I still do not understand why you say Hood lost the war, Bob." In truth, he had never studied land warfare before, and was amused by his friend's preoccupation with the American War of '61.

Cleburne merely sighed and looked out into the bright summer sunlight. He dreamed of retiring to the Naval Academy or the War College to write a tome that would make him the new Alfred Thayer Mahan—a book that would be rich with anecdotes and examples from land war as well. But he was constantly rotated to sea, and scholarship was no more highly regarded by his admirals than by Isoroku's masters at Etajima, who preferred swimming to study.

"The North was tired, Isoroku. Very tired. Three long years of bloodshed. Twenty times as many killed in action as the Russians lost at Tsushima in '05. Lincoln was up for reelection, that quaint American custom we have. McClellan was running against him on a peace platform. Let them go! To hell with the Rebs! We've had enough blood!"

"But then why—?"

"Joe Johnstone knew the score. He didn't have enough men to take

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William Sherman head on, so he fenced with him. Instead of going headlong into battle like Rodzeinski at Tsushima, he circled. Retreat a little, feint, back off, circle. Month after month while the Yankees hungered for a victory. Grant was getting his ears pasted in Virginia. More than 60 percent of Grant's army was gone by the time of the election, replaced by green troops from the other side of the Rapidan. One bloody defeat after another. Lee was even in worse shape because his casualties, though smaller, couldn't be replaced, and he finally was forced to surrender. But not until six months after the election. To win a second term, Lincoln had to have a big win before the voting. And Johnstone refused to give him one."

Yamamoto sat on the painted planks in the shade, and remembered the history lesson he had absorbed as they drove down. He nodded and said slowly, "Until Jefferson Davis replaced him with a gambler. Who would attack and attack until he had totally destroyed his army, and made Lincoln a president of a second term."

He paused for a moment and then continued, "And this is where your great-great-uncle fell."

Cleburne suddenly looked very serious. "Patrick Cleburne, one of the best. We sailors return our dead to the sea, but he and four other Confederate generals lay on this very porch after the battle. All dead. Another seven generals were wounded or captured. When Schofield slipped away in the night to join with Thomas, who had already fortified the city, Hood chased him to Nashville with an almost leaderless army, to attack fifty thousand dug-in men with less than half that number."

Yamamoto shuddered. They had chattered and argued all the way from D.C., and with his exceptional memory, he had learned a lot. The North had all the industry, most of the population, the cash, the navy, the railroads. Economically, the South had never had a chance. Yet here, watching the long grass ripple in the wind over the uncountable white headstones, it was easy to believe in illusions. The illusion that the war was endless, the delusion that Southern pride was stronger than vulgar men with very many cannons.

Yamamoto finally broke the silence. "Hood was very Japanese. Attack, attack. Better to fall in the first assault than to live in the disgrace of refusing battle."

Cleburne grinned. "Joe Johnstone was willing to accept the disgrace of a free Confederacy."

When the *Yamato* fired its first broadside at San Diego, the blast deafened Yamamoto. The ship was new, having steamed her trials only two months before Pearl Harbor, but he had drafted her for this mission in spite of her imperfect readiness. Her nine main guns fired ton-and-a-

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half shells 46 cm in diameter, the heaviest armament ever carried by a warship in 3,000 years of sea-fights. Together, the triple turrets weighed 8,000 tons—as much as a cruiser—and they could lob their shells as far as 40 km. The concussion alone could spring a ship's plates; the old *Rodney* had been in drydock for six months after pounding the K.M.S. *Bismarck* with her puny 40 cm guns. And yet the German dreadnought had lost her gun director early, and had not scored a single hit.

With luck, some of the shells screaming into the darkness might land in the U.S. Navy anchorage. The real target, known only to Yamamoto, was the city itself: the women, the children, the old men, the adolescents dreaming of battles.

Every thirty seconds, another mighty salvo. The rate would fall off to save the barrels as the bombardment continued, but *Yamato* would turn for home with very little left in her main magazines, and the rifling on the big guns worn and in need of reboring—an operation impossible in war. But this one throw of the dice would *be* the war, would be the climax that would convince Roosevelt that his enemy's admiral was a genius and his battleships as large as mountains. That the yellow hordes were poised for invasion, the West Coast naked to the plunging meteors of the enemy!

After the recoil had almost jolted him from his feet for the third or fourth time, he finally climbed into his chair on the semicircular bridge, and thought of his wife, Reiko. She was not, by normal standards, much of a catch. At 162 cm, she was considered unusually tall for a Japanese woman and not very pretty besides. Her father was merely a middle-class farmer. And so when he had proposed in a long letter full of reasons why she should not marry him, she had accepted anyway.

Her mother had been very upset when she had visited them in his old bachelor quarters in Tokyo. It was furnished chiefly with beer crates donated by his drinking buddies. Her mother had been forced to drink sake from a chipped rice bowl because there were no cups in the house; Reiko had not wanted to bother her husband with such details. She had known from the first that his real love was the navy.

Nonetheless, they had in time moved into a real house and filled it with four children. Before their marriage, Reiko—very unusually for an unmarried, middle-class woman—had milked the cows and delivered milk for her father instead of remaining in seclusion at home. She was steady and hard-working and just what he had needed. And this night he was slaughtering a thousand wives as precious to their husbands as she to him, and staining the streets of the city with the blood of uncountable children as much loved, perhaps much more loved, than his own.

When the thunder finally ceased and *Yamato* and its three escorting

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destroyers began their full-speed run—not west, as the Americans expected, but south until the dawn turn, off the coast of Mexico—his ears rang for hours. When he could hear again, he clumped down to his seacabin a deck below to get a couple of hours of sleep, but before he rolled into bed, he took out his little black book.

So many dead! The roster of men who had died under his command went all the way back to the naval air training school at Kasumigara in 1923, but since the war had begun, there had been so many that he could not even learn all of their names. But he wrote solemnly, "The people of San Diego, USA," and then added, "Pilot Tokota, name and rank unknown," to honor the flyer who had dived his fighter into the American Catalina flying boat before it could betray the *Yamato* task force to the mainland. Finally, he tried to rest. But with the bulk of the fleet continuing westward after the Battle of the Golden Gate, broken off just four days earlier, he was still awake at dawn. The Americans, however, were completely fooled.

They never found the *Yamato*. By attacking and attacking, boldly, recklessly, he had ensorceled the same illusion that Joe Johnstone had conjured by doing exactly the opposite. Roosevelt and Churchill sent secret emissaries to Wake Island only a couple of weeks later to write the truce.

As he and Cleburne walked along the sand at Wake, Yamamoto was elated. The shadows had finally lifted; Japan had a future.

Cleburne noticed his mood and gently reproved him. "We still have a war to fight, you and I. The Nazis control almost the whole of Europe. They won't fall easily."

Yamamoto, trying to stretch his short legs to keep up with Cleburne, nodded. "Yes, but together, we will destroy them."

Cleburne stopped abruptly and looked out at the *Chicago*, anchored only a few hundred yards offshore. "You can almost smell the anger. Pearl Harbor is still so fresh—Isoroku, do you really understand how much we hate you? To most Americans, you're a greater monster than Hitler."

Yamamoto lowered his eyes and looked at the foam hissing on the beach. He had so much wanted to go back to America someday, just to visit.

"I am the sword of my Emperor," he murmured. Then abruptly his eyes flashed, and he waved his arms around.

"Look at what we will give back to you. This island. Guam. The Philippines. Burma. All the spoils of the blood of a hundred thousand Japanese. We will keep nothing that we took from you. Only China, and

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only a resumption of oil. And many more of us will die fighting half the world away from home. *Your* enemies."

The burst was unworthy of him, and he fell silent.

"Yes, Isoroku. But shouldn't you have said, 'Our enemies'?"

Yamamoto met his eyes and realized that Cleburne had seen through his second greatest illusion. He bowed his head without speaking.

Cleburne nodded slowly. "I thought it was something like that. When Captain Abe told me that Lieutenant Commander Konichi had been your aide, I was sure."

Yamamoto knelt by the foam and washed his hands, as if purifying himself. "He died without ever knowing the whole story. But I had a blank rescript with the imperial seal."

"The Emperor? I thought he was a figurehead."

" 'All the seas everywhere are brothers to each other. Why then do the winds and waves of strife rage so throughout the world?' It was written by the Meiji Emperor seventy years ago. At the council of state last September when the decision for war was made, the Emperor broke five years of silence by reading that poem. He wanted to leave room for the army to save face, but he wanted them to know what he felt. Unmistakably. You know what happened."

Cleburne sat down on the sand. "Yet somehow, he found another way."

"I had an audience with him five days before Pearl Harbor. 'To receive the Imperial Will.' " He waved his hands in the air to dry them. "I said only what was expected, but I gave him a book on fishes. And in it were translations of speeches by Mr. Hitler about his plans for inferior races. Konichi, who could speak German, did the research. He was quite shocked. Even I was, and I never trusted the Nazis. We have been so blind!"

"And?"

"And a note to His Majesty that sometime perhaps he would find them useful. At the council of state where the U-89 incident was to be smoothed over, he broke his silence again, and read those extracts. Then he said, 'When the Nazis come for us, I shall die like a samurai. I expect no less from you.' And then the council reversed itself. If he had challenged them directly—but he shamed them instead."

"Your Emperor is the only Japanese who is ranked as high as you in our pantheon of demons."

Yamamoto laughed. "I am honored."

Then his face turned serious. "I know your people are spoiling for a fight. When Germany is finished, we will toast the victory and not fight. But China will remain between us. Pearl Harbor will remain between us. The danger will be great for very many years."

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Behind them, there was sudden shouting. Cleburne rose. "Lunch hour must be almost over, Isoroku. Perhaps—"

And then they heard the eruption of aircraft cannon and machine guns and saw tracers darting toward the hastily constructed hut where the meetings were being held. Incredulous, Cleburne put his hands on his hips as the plane, a twin-engined bomber in Japanese markings, roared around for another pass.

Yamamoto murmured. "Inukai." In 1932, nine army officers had murdered the Prime Minister—and had become public heroes, only lightly punished. "Two–Twenty-six." On that day in 1936, a coup attempt by a cabal of army officers had failed, but the Finance Minister and former prime minister Saito had been slaughtered. "And me."

American sentries were now blazing away with rifles and pistols, but the Japanese soldiers who manned the antiaircraft batteries were confused and did not fire. Then Captain Abe ran down the dirt road that paralleled the beach, shouting, and belatedly, a couple of machine gun nests opened up. But then the pilot strafed the road. Abe was knocked down by the bullets as if smashed by a giant hammer. Two American sentries shooting their 45-caliber Colt automatics were bowled over and then a cluster of four Japanese officers in their ceremonial dress whites crumpled under the palm trees. As the plane came around for yet another run, Yamamoto saw it was a twin-engined army reconnaissance plane, code-named Dinah. How had it flown so far? But the army had its own transports and submarines.

Cleburne scowled at the slender palms. "They won't protect us from 20mm cannon. What—"

Yamamoto sprinted for the water, wading in until he was waist deep and then swimming. "Come on, Bob!"

They both dove as the assassin fired, but even underwater, Yamamoto felt a sharp pain as an almost-spent bullet smashed his ankle. He heard a muffled grunt, then surfaced and looked around. As the heavy twin-engined bomber dove, a navy Zero appeared off its starboard beam and fired. As its cannon shells exploded against the side of the bomber, the assassin's aircraft staggered and sideslipped. Metal flew from the rudder and elevators. Then it nosed down, trying to regain the line before it was too late, and the Zero fired again. Twin streaks of machine gun tracer from the fighter's nose, thicker, slower streaks from the cannon in each wing. The bomber fired and a line of splashes ran toward them, a few feet wide. As it flew past, the fuselage of the bomber erupted in flame, and in no more than five seconds, it was burning from nose to tail.

Yamamoto swam over to Cleburne, who was gasping and struggling. His blood stained the water around him as the American splashed desperately, trying to keep afloat.

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"Let me pull you in, Bob."

And then Yamamoto grabbed his friend's collar and struck out strongly for shore.

As he struggled with the burden of a man nearly twice his size, wounded himself, he remembered. A very young Isoroku had been hurled into the sea when his skiff had capsized while he was fishing. He had reached the sea-cave alive, but the high winds had whipped the ocean into a great frenzy, and for two days and nights he was marooned on that tiny, brine-drenched sanctuary, chilled to the bone. But he was a poor boy growing up in a bleak fishing village on the snow-and-storm-swept western coast, and he had waited.

Waited as Joe Johnstone had waited, not from weakness or fear but from planning, from understanding his enemy. Within a few months, the Nazis would be flogged from the earth like vampires, and he would be a great hero, slotted for Navy Minister. And from that eminence he would spin more illusions, he knew not how. Magic for the militarists in his own country. Bluffs and sleight-of-hand for the Allies, still burning with secret shame and resentment. And somehow, he would make the peace stick. "Why then do the winds and waves of strife rage so?"

When it was shallow enough to wade, he let his feet touch and then heaved under his big friend's shoulder until they were both upright. Cleburne was still dazed and bleeding from a wound in his shoulder, but he helped a little, leaning on Yamamoto's shoulder, as they waded through the breaking waves.

For a moment, Yamamoto closed his eyes, seeing the boy Isoroku struggling through the waves. Now, as then, he would finally reach the shore. ●

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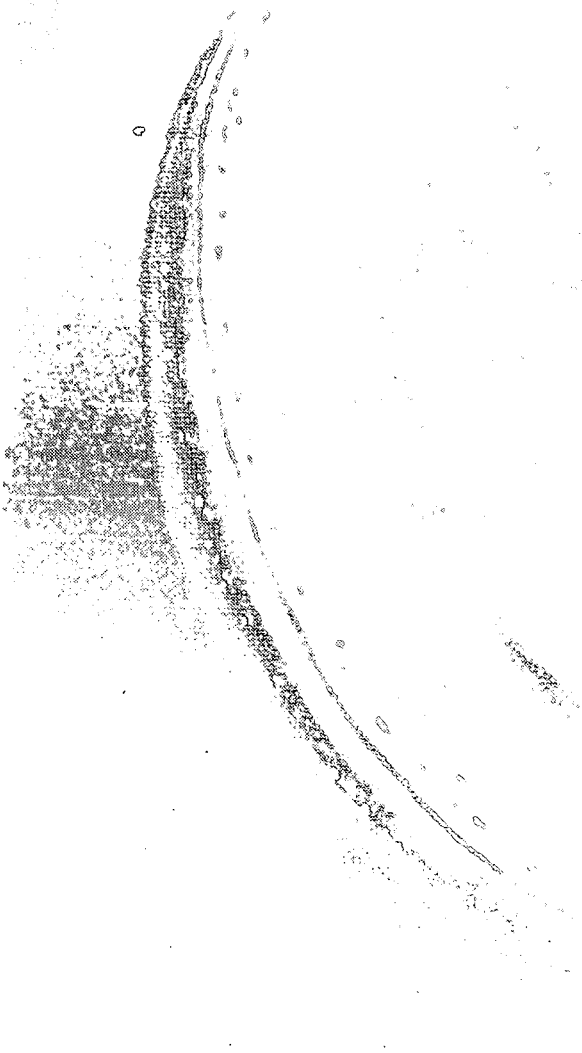

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TO THE EASTERN GATES

by Thomas Wylde

With only hours to spare, six American astronauts and civilians must try to make some sense of their truly bizarre rendezvous with an extraterrestrial spaceship and its exotic inhabitants. . . .

art: A. C. Farley

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"None can usurp this height," return'd that shade,
"But those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest. . . ."

—Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion*

1

Dropping with Hyperion through the radiant black sky toward the distant and arbitrary plane of the ecliptic, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Cameron Gray attempts to survive another entertaining dream of death: the sixth in a series, and not the last.

Check it out:

In his dream, the lake is absurdly small, the forested mountains closing in all around, steel-roofed buildings crowded close to the dark blue water. The breeze is warm on his face. The green-and-white rowboat rises and falls on a small chop, water slapping the wooden sides with a rhythmic hollow sound: *thunk . . . thunk . . . thunk*. The rays of the sun press down like a shower of white-hot needles. He is alone in the little boat. In his hands, the cool iron of the anchor, retrieved from its shadowy nest of rough-coiled rope beneath the forward seat.

In his dream he knows what is going to happen, but he lets it happen because this is just a dream and he wants to see how it will go. Poised in the darkness of memory is the pressure of all the times he's let this dream play itself out.

Go ahead.

He swings the anchor back and heaves it over the bow of the rowboat. He could see the way the dry cotton rope is looped around his left ankle, but he threw the anchor anyway. He is only nine years old, and he wants to run this little experiment in cause and effect.

The anchor splashes, and drops beneath the surface with a glopping noise. The rope plays out, faster and faster, humming against the boat, the note rising, rising—until he's jerked off his feet. He twists, flapping for balance, and bangs his head hard on the thick wooden gunnel. The sky darkens just enough to let a few stars come out. Then he's in the water, going down, and his face is very cold. Bubbles squirm past his cheeks and tickle his ears.

In his dream, he just rides the anchor down, his eyes open, gazing at the curious trout. He looks down and watches the anchor sizzle into the depths, water streaming back in delicate white lines. Under his feet is the image of the sun, glinting off something on the bottom, a hundred fifty feet below. Refracted nodes of light branch out like petals, rippling in the current; it looks like a flower of fire.

He drops: deeper and deeper . . .

The last thing he feels is the pressure swelling in his head, building like the roar of choral voices. In crescendo, rough hands bang together, slapping his ears: a deafening *ssssssshout!*

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2

Distance to the sun: 18.95 million miles
Velocity: 93.75 miles per second
Time to ETD: 35 hours 48 minutes

Alex Gray woke with the sound of that shout in his stinging ears. Long pale legs kicked out, banging the hard blue walls of his plastic sleep cubicle. He opened his eyes, found himself floating in front of the ventilator's hissing nozzle. His face was cold, as if lake water still poured down his cheeks. He took a long, shuddering breath, astonished he wasn't still underwater, then reached out to twist the air nozzle shut. He coughed, his throat dry. He worked his tongue in his mouth, trying to make saliva, and—having failed—swallowed hard. *Damn.*

His scalp itched like crazy with a case of unspecific crud, but he fought the impulse to scratch it, because he knew that made it worse. He could almost *feel* the way his thick blond hair clotted together in gummy clumps. He thought: I am a wad of rancid garbage . . . and I'm going to stay that way.

Maybe there'd be water for a shower in a couple of days, when they were safely off the rock and on their way back. Until then, it made no sense to get clean.

His nervous stomach rolled and fluttered. He swallowed air so he could burp it out in long grumbling tones. Oh, man! He sounded like a sick bassoon.

Ninety-six days in freefall, and he still wasn't used to it.

When he closed his eyes, he could see the sun burning through lake water, as silvery bubbles wobbled upward. "Dios," he whispered, trying to shake himself awake. He took another deep breath and whistled it out, ending in a small and humorless laugh. "Nice work, Gray. You're really holding together."

He twisted onto his side and slid the pleated privacy curtain aside, relieved to find the tiny cabin empty. He had a feeling he had shouted in panic just before waking, as he floated in the paralyzing grip of hypnapompic sleep. All things considered, screaming nightmares out of one's childhood were not the best advertisement for competent officers.

And speaking of competent officers . . .

He studied his countdown watch, found the shift-time window, and groaned. He was late.

Again.

3

Five minutes later, he was on the flight deck, pawing his unkempt hair back into place, and grinning unhappily in the brilliant sunlight

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that blasted through the protective slats. "Oh, man. Have we landed on the sun yet?"

Curtis Jones laughed. "Have a nice nap?"

"If it gets any better, I'm going to have to give it up."

He could still feel himself dropping through that cold, cold water. *(Deeper . . . deeper . . .)*

"Uh, you're a little late, Colonel."

Again.

Thanks for not saying it.

"Sorry."

Jones shrugged, smiling in that boyish way of his. Lots of fluffy brown hair, meticulously combed: Dennis the Menace, without a hint of menace. It irritated Gray to see that Captain Jones had come up with yet another starched blue Air Force jumpsuit. Where the hell did he *get* those things? Everybody *else* was running around grubbier than death and twice as smelly (well, everybody but Colonel Liang: She was on her own schedule).

Gray said, "On the move again?"

"Oh, you bet."

Gray watched as the captain up-dated his colorful chart. It showed the rock's diving path to perihelion, and the *Arthur C. Clarke*'s current position, eighteen million miles above the ecliptic—"You Are Here!" the little stick-on sign said—plunging downward, faster and faster, dragged by Hyperion toward a close solar approach that their unarmored ship wasn't going to survive.

"How's the schedule?"

Stupid question.

Captain Jones laughed. "And speaking of things that go horribly wrong, Chandler Young is looking for you."

Gray shook his head. "Goddamn civilians."

"Only the beginning, Spike. The Old Lady wants you, too."

"Well, now: I guess that makes it *perfect*."

4

Colonel Liang was in the tiny office she'd set up for herself in the auxiliary airlock, talking on the radio to NASA. Or rather, she was talking *at* NASA. The eight-minute delay made normal conversation impossible.

Gray floated in front of the glass for a moment, feeling antsy. Well, okay: She's busy. He started to go. Liang reached out and rapped on the airlock's porthole, motioned for him to stay. He nodded, frowning. Liang adjusted the slender gray curve of the headset's microphone and kept on talking, eyes on her notes: "—hard to give you definitive reasons for the slippage in the schedule. You just have to understand the situation here is more difficult than it may seem to you. Uh . . ." She paused, rubbing a hand through the short black bristles of her brush-cut hair. She glanced

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at Gray, and dropped her hand. "However, we are . . . uh, updating your last timetable. And by the end of the next work period, I expect to be largely caught up with earlier predictions."

Gray shook his head. Not happening. Behind Liang was a big digital clock that read 35 hours 35 minutes—all that was left of the ninety hours they had started with. As he watched, another minute clicked off. He smiled, feeling sick again. Liang didn't know what she was talking about.

She looked at him, still dictating. "As to the solar observations, they are running well within optimum—"

Yeah, sure; Gray tuned out. As far as he was concerned, solar observation was the exclusive problem of Science, specifically Judy Taves-Roth.

While the commander droned on, speaking ultra-distinctly to get her words through the narrow bandpass transmission circuit, Gray hovered just outside the airlock port and studied the map of Hyperion taped to the wall in there.

All yellow and black and splotchy red, it looked something like a diseased hamburger bun: three miles across and one mile thick, spinning on its short axis once every five minutes and twenty-one seconds. The rounded end of the bun was locked onto the sun, avoiding the chaotic tumble of that other Hyperion, one of Saturn's minor moons. (This Hyperion was named after the solar god of the Titans, for obvious reasons: It would pass within two point four three million miles of the sun.) Its surface—first thought to be rocky—turned out to be covered in some sort of cankerous barnacle infestation. However, portions of the wide rim were free of crusting. Some of these shiny tumors might be motors . . . or weapons. One of them turned out to be the way inside.

Gray had found the damned thing, and he'd been happy enough at the time. Now he couldn't help thinking that if there'd been no obvious hatch, they would have *left* by now . . . instead of riding an orbit down to certain destruction.

Certain destruction.

That had a nice ring to it.

"Something funny, colonel?" asked Liang, peeling off her headset. Her eye pouches were dark and puffy; nobody was getting much sleep these days. "You think it's funny I'm stuck in this airlock?" Her voice on the intercom was tinny.

"No, ma'am."

Not funny, just pointless.

"Before I forget," said Liang. "I want you to tape another stand-up inside the rock. You know the drill: Don't show anything important, just smile and be friendly for the folks back home. And get Jones in there someplace, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Gray hated doing the stand-ups, but Curtis Jones seemed to enjoy them. Liang did most of them herself, right from her little airlock office:

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long rambling monologues for NASA to edit later. In keeping with the mission's official secret status, nothing went out live to the public.

Liang asked, "How are things going?"

"I haven't been over there yet today."

Colonel Liang didn't smile. "Don't you think you'd better get going?"

"Uh, somebody said you wanted to see me."

"You heard what I told NASA. We're about to get back on schedule. Don't make a liar out of me, Gray."

Gray looked at the clock: 35 hours 32 minutes. "I'll try not to."

"Don't try, do."

"Yes, ma'am."

Idiot.

"So take off!" she said, waving him away. "See what Chandler Young wants. And whatever it is, get those guys back on schedule. No excuses!"

5

Gray in the lander, pissed: He banged the airlock hatch, giving the latch-wheel a savage spin. No excuses, she says. No excuses! She wouldn't talk to me like that if she knew I was going nuts.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . . bubbles streaming away . . .)

For the third time, he glanced upward to scan the status lights on the inside of his helmet, confirming the pressure-suit's go-status. Then he settled into the pilot's seat, straps tightening automatically, and pulled the plastic checksheet from its overhead slot. A moment later, he shoved it back in.

Don't *try* to fly, Gray, just *fly!*

Right.

He went through the powering up procedures from memory, reaching the familiar switches with effortless floating movements of his arms. Flat data screens snapped to life, flickering with diagnostic routines. He'd trained for two years to fly this low-bid scrap heap down to the surface of Mars. Then Hyperion had shown up, high above the plain of the ecliptic, 1164 million miles out, and dropping fast. Seventy-nine days later the revised mission launched from Earth orbit: coded black, re-staffed all-American, and routed straight to hell.

On line: green lights, all the way, fan motors buzzing his back through the seat. Let's go!

He separated from the *Clarke* and waited a moment for Hyperion to rotate under him. The rock had the density of dry bone, which meant the *Clarke*—orbiting 205 meters from its surface—needed four hours to make one circuit. In that time, Hyperion ran through forty-four of its nasty little days.

Gray crossed the gap when dome number one—the airlock, its shiny pitted metal splashed with red dye—rose above the horizon.

He matched velocity at the outer edge of the bun and inverted his craft.

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He eased the aux-2 lander into the shadow of Hyperion's wide docking lip, setting it down beside the cradle that held the *Clarke*'s primary lander. Gray's spidery craft hardly flexed on its pneumatic shocks, over-engineered as it was for point three seven gees of Martian gravity. He powered down and sat for a moment in the comforting silence. The lander was secure here, pinned to the underside of the docking lip by the outward thrust of the rock's spin gravity.

It was a quick shuffle to the small airlock hatch, slipping around in the dark shadow, the metal deck greasy with frozen gasses. From this side of the docking ring, he could see the slowly circling stars, angled high above the ecliptic. The axis of this endless night shifted as Hyperion followed its hyperbolic orbit, though so far the movement was imperceptible. That would change as the rock accelerated down to perihelion. On the other side of the docking ring, the glare of the sun occluded everything.

He popped the hatch and stepped inside the alien airlock. It resembled a cross between an industrial clothes drier and an automatic abattoir: curved steel walls faced with sharp, lint-clotted mesh . . . only it wasn't lint sticking to the mesh. Captain Jones had the idea this wasn't an airlock after all, but a kind of garbage disposal unit. Gray didn't like to think about it while he was in there.

When the airlock neared the end of its cycle, Gray twisted the locking seal on his helmet and pulled it off. He checked the pressure regulator on his emergency airmask. The air inside Hyperion was a low-pressure mixture of helium and oxygen—breathable, but exhausting. It was like running in a track meet, halfway up Mt. Everest. As the inner hatch rotated open, the pressure differential made his ears pop. His jaw dropped, and he swallowed painfully, ears crackling.

He closed the hatch, locked the seal, and watched the blue bubble float in the dial. No leaks. To the makers of Hyperion, blue seemed to mean: "Okay."

(Or maybe it meant: "The disposal's ready to run.")

He tried to smile.

Without warning, the bubble went out of focus. He slumped dizzily, leaning back against the cold metal. Damn. Another day and a half of this crap. How was he ever going to make it?

(No excuses, Gray.)

Yeah, right.

He opened his eyes and waited for the universe to lock in. Come on now: Big big smile.

I love my work! I do! I really do!

(Look, everybody: I'm fucking with my attitude again!)

No excuses, my *ass*.

Just *do* it!

He put his helmet in the big plastic bin by the airlock hatch, then climbed out of the pressure suit. This was as far as the P-suits went; some of the juices of Hyperion were just too corrosive.

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He pulled on his stained leather gloves, arranged the junk hanging from his toolbelt, and pushed off, groaning theatrically. Now it was official: The new day had begun.

Hippity-hop he went, threading his way through the shadowy hangar, where half a dozen black, knobby-looking alien shuttles were parked. These ugly metal-and-ceramic machines, the first artifacts discovered inside Hyperion, had—for a short time—excited a great deal of interest. Now they were pretty much ignored. The doors of a large airlock bulged outward at one end of the hangar, big enough to take any two of the alien shuttles, but nobody had ever figured out how to get them open. So far, it hadn't been necessary.

Before he stepped off the hard floor and onto the spongy stuff, Gray stopped to check the jittery red numbers on the humming power generator. Looking good. The squat green generator, which had barely fit through the airlock, was too big to go any deeper into Hyperion. From here, thick blue cables led off into the darkness, and Gray followed them up the low-gee spin-slope to the opening of Highway One.

He paused in the entrance and kicked at the power cables, which after two days were sinking into the wet flesh of Hyperion. He got down on his hands and knees and grabbed one of the fat blue cables, which had worked itself over to the wrong side of the tunnel. He was prying it from the muck when the damned thing squirmed in his hand. "Dios!" he yelled, dropping it fast. The cable disappeared into the wall like a lungfish oozing into the mud. Gray caught his breath. Okay, that one wasn't a cable after all . . . just a little something Hyperion had whipped up.

He put his flashlight on high-beam and examined the tunnel. The pebbly yellow flesh quivered; in the darkness beyond his beam there flickered a million amber eyes.

And I'm going *in* there, he thought. Christ Almighty . . . on three.

He began the count, adjusted his safety glasses, gritted his teeth, and—somewhere around five or six—dived yelling into the main entrance. He charged along, all crouched over, half running, half crawling through the spiral tunnel, his gloves drenched in slime. Curtis Jones called this place the Ant Farm From Hell. To Gray, the name sounded way too pleasant.

He followed out the real (and also disappearing) power cables and the blue-green fiber-optic safety line, which pulsed with tuned laser light. At each branching, he looked for the hand-lettered road signs, but most were missing—even the obscene ones. Something kept stealing them.

The deeper he got, the lighter the spin-gravity became, until he had trouble keeping his knees bent. Every time he lost his concentration, raising up that extra half inch, he'd graze the roof of the tunnel, mopping up with his slicked-back hair a thick coat of viscous yellow slime. "Oh, *Christ!*" The slime drooled down the open neck of his grungy red jumpsuit. He wanted to stop, to scrape the muck off, but it was pointless. There was always another load of sticky cold muck waiting for him.

"Should have gone to *Mars* . . ."

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"Hey, Alex!"

He was passing the entrance to the Green Room, one of the large fleshy antechambers that surrounded the central void. He turned, saw Judy Taves-Roth, and bounced over in one slowly dropping arc. Spin gravity here was about seven-thousandths of a gee.

"Hey, babe," he said, in the Donald Duck cartoon voice they had to live with. All that low-density helium in Hyperion's air raised voices to a squeak. "How's it going?"

She laughed and handed him a squeeze bottle. "Better get juiced up before I tell you."

"That bad?" He took the bottle and sucked. Cranapple.

Judy dug through her tote bag, on a lunch break. For the moment, her safety glasses hung around her neck, revealing large, pale green eyes. She was wearing the same stupid Miss Piggy swimming cap, trying to keep Hyperion out of her long red hair.

Gray waved the plastic juice bottle. "Doesn't that thing make your head itch?"

"These days, everything makes my head itch." She unwrapped a lumpy granola cluster and tossed the foil to the wall, where an iridescent green spider the size of a catcher's mitt grabbed it and ran away.

He watched the sparkling paper disappear up a burrow hole. "That's what's happening to our tunnel signs. What, are you training the little bastards?"

She motioned with her granola thing, and he handed back the squeeze bottle. She bit off a piece of soft cookie, chewed with her eyes closed a moment, then stared at him while she squirted cranapple into her mouth, smiling.

"Good?" he asked.

"Mmmm."

He stroked her arm, smoothing the grimy sleeve of her T-shirt. "Let's go find a dark cave or something. I need another dose of the bumpdee-bumpdee-bump."

She smiled with just her lips, kept chewing, and—busy with both hands—nudged him with her shoulder. After a moment, she swallowed, the motion exaggerated in near-weightlessness. "Chandler Young's looking for you."

"Not my type, babe. I want *you*. I need you. I can't live without—"

"Not this time, Ace. You'll have to settle for Young."

He groaned in extravagant, cartoon anguish. "That little weasel is hanging up the whole program."

She waved half the granola cluster in his face. "Haven't you heard? There's not enough *time* for a whole program. Everything we do here is just a drop in the ocean."

The corners of Gray's mouth twitched downward, the image of a deep ocean spreading between the horizons of his mind. He was all alone out

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there, and for a moment he had trouble getting his breath. A bitter aftertaste from the fruit juice burned at the back of his throat.

"Look," Judy said, nodding past him. He turned.

One of the big Hypers gurgled by, its rippling pink globe of a body molding itself to the tunnel's soft curve. For a moment, it halted just outside the Green Room, cilia caressing the stubby black nodules that emerged from the wall beyond. Then the creature whistled to itself and pushed off toward the wide S-shaped curve that led out into the central chamber. Gray watched it go, saying, "Why don't they approach us?"

"Maybe it's your breath."

"Ha ha."

When he turned back, Judy was peering critically at him, as if trying to see his eyes past the safety glasses. "You look like refried death."

"Thank you," he said, combing slime out of his hair with gloved fingers. When his scalp tingled its warning, he stopped. He wiped his hands on the thighs of his jumpsuit, adding another layer of muck to the dark stains, and took a hit of oxygen from his emergency tank. "This place sucks."

His oxygen-rich voice, now low and clear, gave the words the weight of a pronouncement from God.

"Wait till Chandler Young finds you. It's gonna be good." She popped the rest of the granola cluster into her mouth and chewed merrily. Plastered flat against her skull, Miss Piggy nodded, grinning her superior grin.

7

The central chamber: immense, echoing, faintly bioluminescent. A dark ovoid hundreds of meters long, it was a zone of near-perfect weightlessness.

Gray waited for a moment at the head of the S-curve, the entrance he and the crew used. (There were countless openings dotted about—all tunnels led eventually to the central chamber.) Yellow nylon safety lines criss-crossed half the opening like a web. Beyond that, a pair of transit lines stretched out into the misty gloom, illuminated partway by floodlights that flickered and pulsed with swarms of tiny flying creatures.

In the distance, a gridwork halo of bright lights surrounded Hyperion's vacant center of mass. The civilians were working there, setting up cameras to record the Killing.

Gray checked his countdown watch, where one of the programmable windows kept track of the schedule. Next performance: 46 minutes. Good. He'd have time to check out the crew and get out of there before anything happened. He'd already seen enough of the Killing.

He again wiped his gloves on the front of his disgusting jumpsuit, then stared across the central chamber, his heart racing. Come on, Gray: Get to work. He blew out one final blast of air, and a swarm of whining gnats

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skittered away from the poison of his carbon-dioxide-rich breath. Well, maybe Judy was right. Maybe it *was* his breath. "Get used to it, you little bastards."

He grabbed a crawler from the recharging rack and hooked it up to one of the yellow transit lines. After checking the battery's charge, he started off toward the lights in the center.

In seconds, he picked up the usual escort of flying spiders. They plucked at his pockets and darted at his eyes, clicking against the plastic lenses of the safety glasses. Gray kept his lips squeezed tight. Eventually the curious creatures got bored, jetting off on puffs of air to look for more interesting playmates. Besides, they had good reason for avoiding the deep void near the center.

The line crawler picked up speed, its tiny motor whining. Halfway to the core lights, the first manta ray swooped down to check him out. The ray was a mottled blue-gray color, with flat, square-shaped wings, twenty-five or thirty feet across. Its vast white mouth gaped, scooping up swarms of gnats (most of which seemed to exit the gill slits unharmed) in pursuit of the occasional flying spider.

Gray shut his eyes and waited. No one had ever been harmed by a ray—not even touched—but the encounters were nerve-wracking. The creatures seemed to be blind, flying by echo-location in the ultrasonic range. Gray could sometimes feel their calls vibrating in the back of his skull.

By the time the whine of the crawler's motor began to descend, he was having trouble getting his breath. He saw Laurel and Hardy figures moving at the periphery of the core: the tall, skinny black man, Chandler Young; and MacPhail, the senior scientist: short, puffy-cheeked; at seventy, one of the oldest men ever to go out into space.

Gray was sick to death of both of them.

When his line crawler hit the magnetically coded shut-down zone, the motor cut back to a whisper. He saw the men turn in his direction, floodlights flickering off MacPhail's glasses. Oh, shit. Gray swung his legs, then jumped for a bank of lights. He hunched over, pretending to check the wire junction for corrosion, and snuck a gulp of oxygen from the little red tank that hung from his toolbelt.

The dividing line is when you start to fear the *effects* of your fear. It seemed to him that he could see that dividing line now. And it seemed to him that he found himself on the wrong damn side.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . . sunlight flickering through the water . . .)

"Dios . . ."

Shut up, Gray.

Something banged his shoulder and he yelled, whirling around, afraid one of the manta rays had landed on him. But it was worse than that. It was Chandler Young.

"I've got to talk to you." Young's eyes were intense, burning white against his sweaty black skin. In a switch on the Laurel and Hardy thing, Young had the moustache. And something else, something infu-

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riating: The man never wore the safety glasses that Gray found so comforting. What was he trying to prove?

"So what's the deal?" Gray asked. "You guys on schedule?"

"No, we're not," MacPhail said, climbing out through the web of safety lines. "And if you want to know *why*—"

"Fuck the schedule," Young said. "There are more important things than schedules."

Gray laughed, as best he could, remembering the look in Colonel Liang's eyes. (No excuses, Gray!) "You want to stay here?" he asked Young. "Fine, talk to the Hypers, maybe they'll let you ride all the way down to perihelion. The *rest* of us would like to haul ass *out* of here—preferably before the ship melts."

"Fine with me," said Young. "Let's leave now."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. This mission is too important to—"

"*Fuck* the mission."

"At ease, Young! I eat civilians, too." Gray instantly regretted the line, especially the cartoon-macho way it sounded: an enraged Daffy Duck.

Young didn't seem to notice. "I mean it," he said, his voice softer. "Let's pack up and go."

"Gad!" said MacPhail.

Gray turned to the old man. "Does this have something to do with the Killing?"

"I know why they do it," Young said.

"Bull!" MacPhail said. "You can't even prove *they* know why they do it. They just *do* it!"

"It's a primitive religion."

MacPhail said, "Oh, that's—"

"It's a ritual sacrifice!"

MacPhail snorted. "Is that what they *told* you?"

"They don't have to say a word. Their actions—"

"—are inexplicable," said MacPhail. "That's because they're *aliens*, you idiot!" He turned to Gray. "And *that's* why we have to set up our cameras and collect as much data as we can. With the remote satellite transmitter, we can get good data for months after we're gone—maybe for years."

"Five, six months, tops," Gray said. "Hyperion is moving too fast to—"

"The *point* is," MacPhail said, "it's not our job to make snap decisions. Even with all the data, it may take years to figure out why—"

"I can *tell* you why," said Young.

"Bull!"

Gray said, "Tell me."

MacPhail groaned. "He doesn't know, Colonel. It might take years to—"

"They're praying," Young said.

"Gad! That's a crock of—"

"Shut up, MacPhail," said Gray. "You're wearing me the fuck out."

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Watch it: Daffy Duck was really pissed *now*.

Chandler Young smiled at MacPhail, daring him to butt in again. The old man glared back. Behind his safety glasses were yet more glasses: the last of the bifocals, according to him. He'd sounded pleased when he said it, as if proud of his fear of routine eye surgery. The weird thing was, it made him look . . . complicated.

Gray turned to Young. "Why are they praying?"

"They want us out of here."

MacPhail's sudden bray of Mickey Mouse laughter made Gray dizzy. Me, too. I want us out of here, too.

"And it's not just *us*," Young said. "*Everything* we brought in here—the lights and cameras and cables and ropes and road maps—all of it's got to be cleaned out. We have to erase the fact that we were ever—"

"You're a lunatic." MacPhail turned to Gray. "The man is without doubt . . ."

Gray waved him quiet. "Your boss here says this can't be proved."

"Exactly!" MacPhail said. "How could he *hope* to prove it? They won't talk to us! They won't even *look* at us!"

"Why the hell should they *have* to?" Young said. "It's obvious that—"

"They leave no written records," said MacPhail, his strong voice overriding Young. "No archives, no tapes, no video, no artifacts of any sort. We don't even know if they're the least bit intelligent."

"Oh, use your fucking eyes!" said Young.

MacPhail flinched, nearly losing his grip on the safety net.

Young said, "They obviously have spoken language. And they have—"

"The whistling," Gray said. "Is that what—"

"Exactly."

"Oh, come on!" said MacPhail, climbing closer.

"Just *listen* to them!" Young said. "It's language! And that's not all. They have ritual. They have jobs. They—"

"What jobs?" asked MacPhail.

"I can't describe it: sort of like gardening."

"Simple animal behavior."

"It's *not*. It's deliberate, directed, and complicated. I think it's some kind of maintenance. For all we know, they even *built* Hyperion. They may be primitive, but they're not stupid."

"Then why won't they pay any attention to us? Why don't they try to find out about us?"

"Maybe we're taboo," Young said. "Maybe they think we're ghosts or evil spirits. Read the literature; there's precedent for this sort of attitude. Look at Papua New Guinea."

"Nonsense!"

Young faltered. MacPhail was the respected anthropologist. Chandler's degree was in archaeology. "Or was it—"

"We're not getting anywhere," Gray said. "And talking about it out here in the soup is making my head ache. Not to mention how silly it sounds, lecturing on helium." He smiled, but his audience was unamused.

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No excuses, Gray! He pointed at MacPhail. "Go back to work, try to—no, *do* whatever you have to do to get back on schedule. We have less than thirty-five hours left. Pretend like you're actually going to make the deadline, okay?"

"I'm trying!"

"Don't—" Gray stopped, Liang's voice bickering in his head like a nasty rattle: Don't try, do!

What a stupid thing to say.

"Fine," said Gray. "That's all I ask. And you, Chandler: When you're on duty, I want to see you working. If you want to spend your break time looking for proof, fine. Convince me we got a problem here."

"All he has to do is convince *you?*" MacPhail asked. "What about Colonel Liang? And for that matter, what about *me?* I'm senior scientist here. He has to convince *me,* pal!"

MacPhail was right, of course, but Gray didn't feel like backing down. Liang hadn't left him room for backing down. "All I said was, he could poke around on his time off."

"What are we going to do?" asked MacPhail. "Just leave? The whole point of this mission is to gather data about an alien culture. And that means setting up equipment and—"

"Even if it kills the subject?" asked Young.

MacPhail threw his head back. "Gad!" He turned on Gray. "Next he'll want us to erase the tapes and discs we've already made. Then we can all blow our brains out."

"You go first," said Young.

"You wish."

Gray's head throbbed. *(Deeper . . . deeper . . . sunlight flickered through the water . . .)* He took a hit of oxygen. "Split up, doctors, if you can't work together. But just get back to work. Time is dribbling away."

8

Gray checked the Green Room, but Judy had gone off to work in the solar lab. He frowned, then climbed into Highway One, headed through the twisting tunnel of meat to the deserted airlock hangar. All the way back he kept thinking: I can't control them, I can't operate them, I can't make them do what Liang says they have to do. I'm screwed.

Gray slogged through the tunnel. He hated the civilians, the way they got to hang out in the clean, dry central chamber, playing with their silly cameras. If they didn't have the Killings to study, they'd be grubbing around all day in this maze of diseased tunnels. "Ungrateful bastards . . ."

At the very least, those guys owed the bulging pink blobs a Thank You note. Instead, all they did was bitch and moan. Goddamn civilians.

Gray finally emerged from the tunnel, wheezing like a first-time marathon runner. He stood bent over beside the generator, dripping gloves on his knees, and sipped from the oxygen bottle until he got his breath

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back. No doubt the idea was to move with slow and stately gait through the tunnels of Hyperion, gliding serenely through this rancid and hideous muck pit, conserving his strength . . . and his dignity . . . but there was just no way he was going to spend that much time in there.

Not happening.

So shoot him.

When he recovered, he shuffled along the hard floor of the hangar, where the spin gravity was greatest, until he came to the outer wall. Here he found a jumbled mound of equipment: motors, drill bits, plastic patches, tubes of sticky sealing goop, and so forth—stuff for the borehole that was to lead the camera cables to the outside, where a plutonium-powered transmitter would relay the images to Earth. More work that hadn't even been started.

"Dios . . ."

Then he remembered the stand-up Liang wanted him to tape. "Oh, shit . . ."

Thinking about everything that remained to be done in the short time they had left made him very tired. He wanted to lie down, but the walls here were wet and cold, and his perpetually damp jumpsuit was too thin. Christ, he thought. I just got out of bed, and all I want to do is flop back in the rack. Something's happening to me.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . .)

With a stiff gloved finger, he scratched his name in the flesh of Hyperion. ("Alex Gray is here!") On the moon, guys piled up rocks and wrote in the powdery soil with sticks: messages that would outlast human civilization, no doubt.

But not here. In a few seconds his words had filled in, disappearing forever.

("Correction: Alex Gray is *not* here!")

"Thank you *very* much," he said, in his most sarcastic voice. He wandered to the nearest alien shuttle and sagged against the open hatchway.

For a moment he gazed into the dark chamber, then unclipped his long black flashlight and shined it into the airlock. A puzzle of dull metal hardware poked out of one wall: the world's most complicated shower stall. One thing was sure, the bulbous Hypers that bounced so peppily through this corroded set of intestines couldn't have operated these shuttles. They had no hands.

In the shuttle's airlock, collected on the spin-gee floor surface, was a cancerous-looking heap of what might have been dried leaves, but almost certainly wasn't. According to the mission's guidelines, they were supposed to get samples, not just for Science, but for the bio-war folks back home. More damned work . . . undone.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . .)

Oh, stop it.

Gray remembered the argument this junk had started, their first day inside the rock. When she saw the "dead leaves" stuff, Judy Taves-Roth

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suggested they try carbon-dating it, to see how long it'd been since Hyperion had been cleaned up. Nice idea. Good science, right?

Not happening.

It was Chandler Young, the hotshot archeologist, who told them it couldn't be done. In fact, he predicted there would be little or no carbon-14 anywhere in this place.

MacPhail didn't believe it. "That's ridiculous. There's carbon in all organic matter."

"Maybe," Young said. "Who knows? Anyway, I don't deny the carbon, just the carbon-14."

"But every living thing that metabolizes—"

"Listen to me," Young said. "There's no nitrogen in the air here."

"What's that got to do with—"

"And even if there *was* nitrogen in the air, it'd be protected by the thickness of the shell."

Gray remembered MacPhail's grin, coming through the faceplate of his isolation suit—back when they all wore the suits and expected them to work. "Protected?" MacPhail said. "Protected from what?"

"Cosmic rays," Young said. "That's how you get carbon-14 back on Earth." He went on to explain, in annoying detail:

High energy protons clobbered the nitrogen nucleus, knocking out secondary neutrons. The neutrons then reacted with nitrogen-14 to form nitrogen-15, which was unstable. It kicked a proton to form carbon-14, which—as MacPhail surely knew—beta-decayed to—

"All right, all right," MacPhail said. "I get it."

Young just couldn't stop. "The point is, you need to *start* with nitrogen in the air in order to get a stable supply of—"

"Shut up, okay? I said I got it!"

Gray remembered the look MacPhail gave Young, his Gad-what-an-asshole expression.

Unfortunately, Young was right about the lack of carbon-14 inside Hyperion. And he kept MacPhail posted, with unnecessary precision.

Was *that* where it all started, their feud, their asinine rivalry?

Goddamn civilians.

Now, as Gray stared into the alien shuttle's airlock, he let his eyes drift out of focus. It was easy: His mind just went limp. Long, wet sigh. He felt himself falling again, dragged into the cold deep water. Christ. Something about riding the ship down toward the sun had triggered the memory of this old boating accident, and the exaggerated nightmares he'd had as a kid.

Cracking up, man. Cracking *up*.

He was going to fuck this mission. He just knew it.

After a minute, a rustling noise roused him. He looked up to see two of the big green spiders fighting over something amongst the alien shuttle's trash. They had this thing—it looked at first like a paperback book—in their jagged mandibles, and were wrestling around in a comic tug-of-war. At last, folks who knew what they were doing. "Go for it,

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guys," said Gray. The sound of his squeaky voice made them stop, and a couple dozen tiny red eyes swiveled around to stare at him.

He recognized what they were fighting over. It *was* a paperback book: Colonel Liang's copy of *Rendezvous with Rama,* by Arthur C. Clarke. Her most prized possession, a book published two years before she was born. Thirteen-year-old Liang had actually confronted Clarke at a science fiction convention in Brighton, insisting on an autograph. Their first day on Hyperion, she had enthroned the book on the sundeck, where it was supposed to remain after they left: a kind of informal memorial to the man who, nearly fifty years before, had speculated on the contents of an alien spacecraft hurtling through the solar system. Half the faxsheets on Earth now called this place "Rama," but nobody on the mission did. The place was just too . . . indifferent.

"Where the hell'd you get that?" Gray asked the spiders. They watched him intently. He leaned in through the hatch, reaching for the book. The spiders tensed, then ran away as his gloved fingertips brushed the book's spine. He grunted, lifting himself from the airlock's lip, using one hand in the one-tenth-gee spin gravity. He lunged, grabbing the book.

"Now behave," he said, climbing back down to the hangar floor.

He took a deep pull on his supplemental oxygen, then stared in horror at the flimsy paperback. Oh, shit! His slimy gloves were making it filthy! Christ! Liang was gonna throw a hissy-fit when she saw the stupid thing. (Who *did* this? What the hell kind of *monster* would do such a thing?) "Oh, screw it." He rapped the book twice on the lip of the airlock and tossed it back to the spiders. "You guys keep it."

Nothing mattered. Hyperion no longer interested him. He felt sick and contaminated. All he wanted to do was go home.

And the only way he could do *that* was if they finished the goddamn mission. He decided at that moment that he wasn't going to take any more shit from Chandler Young.

9

Distance to the sun: 16.78 million miles
Velocity: 96.01 miles per second
Time to ETD: 29 hours 15 minutes

Five hours later Gray called Young and MacPhail into a meeting on the sundeck, where brilliant light streamed through Hyperion's oddly louvered, quartz-plated windows. They'd taken it over, rigging a kind of informal airlock, and filled it with an oxygen-rich mix. Folks could talk normally in there, and that seemed appropriate. If they were going to discuss important matters, then by God they would talk like men, not like stoned cartoon characters.

They had the place to themselves, as Judy was back aboard the *Clarke,*

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zonked out on the mid deck, and Curtis Jones was busy in the airlock hangar, tinkering with his favorite alien shuttle.

Gray had a fascinating piece of news from NASA, but before he could get it out, MacPhail started in complaining about the work schedule. He wanted more time.

Gray almost laughed, thinking what Liang would say to that. "No can do, MacPhail. Maybe we can give you Captain Jones."

"Is that the best you can—"

"Be thankful." Gray looked at Young. "It looks like everybody's going to have to be working double shifts. You understand me?"

MacPhail laughed.

Young said. "What I do on my own time—"

Gray shook his head. "Not good enough."

"You said—"

"That was then. Things are in motion, you know?"

"But that's not—"

"Fair?" said Gray. "Not *fair?* Let me tell you something, doctor—"

"Asshole." Young turned and skipped to the airlock.

"Hey, I'm not finished with you, Young!"

"Yes, you are!"

Gray's face burned. He ignored MacPhail's grin. Gad.

"Kind of hard to handle, isn't he?" MacPhail said, when Young had gone.

Gray shrugged, a small gesture, on his way to the louver control panel. A moment later the sundeck dimmed, as slats rotated over the windows. In the gloom, MacPhail looked younger, more energetic, his bloated cheeks robust. The double reflection from his nested glasses lent him an authoritative air. It gave Gray hope: Maybe MacPhail still controlled Young. . . .

MacPhail said, "I guess I'm going to have to keep an eye on him from now on."

At least.

Gray said, "Can you finish the job without him?"

"I doubt it. He's wasted too much of my time as it is. Argues incessantly about—well, you've heard him. Can't we extend the deadline?"

"No!!"

"Okay . . . I just asked."

Gray laughed. "Was that me yelling?"

MacPhail smiled.

Gray said, "Can't be done. Believe me."

When they had rendezvoused with the rock, they were just under thirty-six million miles from the sun, about as far as the orbit of Mercury. At that distance, the *Clarke* was pretty safe. Ninety hours later—a bit over twenty-nine hours from right now—they'd be six and a half million miles from the sun. According to NASA, that was close enough: The skin temperature of the ship would then be 1500 degrees Fahrenheit. They'd have to be out of there and ready to blast their way clear of Hyperion's

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hyperbolic orbit. Isaac Newton controlled the rules of the game. No, worse: This close to the sun, the mechanics of the orbit were set by Einstein. More time? Not happening.

MacPhail said, "The thing about Chandler Young is he got too much handed to him. This one mission is going to make his career. He'll go back to Earth and write books and get tenure and hang out on TV talk shows. He knows it's a gift, and I think he's feeling guilty."

"So he wants to do something big, is that it?"

MacPhail nodded. "He wants to earn it."

"Being black doesn't help."

"What do you mean?"

"He has more to prove."

MacPhail nodded, looking off. "I guess."

"Any chance he's right?"

The old man made several noises, none of which were words. He picked thoughtfully at his gloves, opening one of the finger seams, where the threads had rotted and the leather was coming apart.

Gray frowned, and waited. Today everybody wanted to jerk him around.

"Here's the thing," said MacPhail, rubbing the grimy palms of his gloves together. "On Hyperion, just about anything you might come up with is . . . possible. The real work comes when you try to evaluate all the hypotheses. And that takes time . . . and all the data we can possibly compile. Our job is to get those data—because no one will ever have another chance to do it. It's just the purest luck that you had your Mars mission almost ready to go when this thing came dropping—"

"Yeah, I know." Gray didn't want to think about the Mars mission. Back on Earth there were two very pissed Soviet cosmonauts and a couple of well-funded Japanese rock hounds who no doubt burned every time they saw the words "News from Rama" come up on their screens in the morning. "So I guess the point," said Gray, "is that we have to get that data. Uh, those data." MacPhail's words sounded funny. "Whatever . . ."

MacPhail ignored the correction. "I don't think we have any choice. Do you?"

"No. We have no choice." God knew *Gray* had no choice, not with Colonel Liang on his butt. "No choice at all," he said, watching the old man's face.

MacPhail looked relieved, as though he were handing over to Gray some important decision. "What do you want me to do?"

"Push him, MacPhail. Push him hard. Crush him, if you have to, but make him work. We're running out of time."

"I know."

Gray remembered he had news. "Oh, yeah. And something's come up that makes those cameras even more important."

"What?"

"NASA just finished new calcs on Hyperion's trajectory. To within nineteen minutes of arc, it's a perfect right-angle hyperbola."

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"That's unusual, I guess, but—"

"There's more," Gray said. "When it leaves our system, it'll be headed straight for Alpha Centauri."

"Really? I understand there might be habitable planets there."

"Exactly. Which is why we'd really like to get a look at the place. This'll be a great opportunity to hitch a ride."

"Or for the cameras to hitch a ride, anyway."

"Yep."

They'd have to work out how to get the weak signal back to Earth; spread out the transmission of pixel numbers or something, make the data redundant as hell. NASA would think of something.

"Still," said MacPhail, "How long will it take for—"

"Well, you're right: That is a problem. On this path, Hyperion will only be moving seventy-some miles a second when it passes the orbit of Pluto."

"So that's . . ."

"Figure about ten thousand years."

MacPhail looked bemused. "Isn't it likely we'll figure out how to go there ourselves before Hyperion ever gets to Alpha Centauri? I mean, *ten thousand years . . .*"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

The way things were going, by the time the pictures of Alpha Centauri started coming in, there wouldn't be a human being left alive on Earth.

10

Check it out:

In his dream, the water is cold and thick, and streams of bubbles rush crackling past his ears. When he looks up he can see the sun pouring into the water. The surface is like a sheet of dark glass rising swiftly overhead, rising to meet the sun. His lungs ache to breathe, and the pressure is building in his head, like a bell throbbing in his ears, ringing, ringing—

11

Distance to the sun: 12.68 million miles
Velocity: 102.13 miles per second
Time to ETD: 17 hours 10 minutes

—ringing, ringing—

Gray woke and struggled out of the hammock's web, the oscillating two-note blare of the smoke alarm in his ears. He reached the primary lander's flight deck in three bruising hops. Every light on the alarm

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panel was blazing. "Jesus Christ!" According to the lights, the ship was consumed in flame.

He flicked the redcap on the suppression system, arming fire extinguishers embedded throughout the ship, but the ready lights didn't come on. The built-in fire suppression system was burned out. He banged the panel with his fist, then had to grab a flight chair to keep from spinning away in the low-gee centrifugal field.

God, it was a nightmare.

Abruptly, all the warning lights flickered and went out, along with the warbling tone. He stared, his head buzzing in the sudden quiet. The panel blurred, and a ghost crept out—formless, white, its movements slow and stealthy. His mouth dropped open; he blinked, tasting sour metal. "What the hell is—"

Then his eyes watered, and his nostrils constricted, filled with the acrid stink of burning electrical insulation. He recognized at last the white wisp rising from the corners of the panel.

"Dios!"

He yanked the fire extinguisher from a sidewall bracket, flicked off the safety, and jammed the twist-lock nozzle into the firehole in the bottom of the warning panel. He squeezed the trigger, blasting the bottle's contents into the hole. Then, letting the extinguisher drift away beneath the console, he popped the lid on an emergency toolkit and scattered the contents over the flightdeck, looking for a number eight torx-head screwdriver.

He got the cover off the panel and probed the dirty-yellow fire retardant foam with the screwdriver. No need to trip the breaker—the circuits were dead.

He looked back over his shoulder, yelling, "Hey! Anybody!" Holding his breath, he listened to the whisper of the ventilator fans. "Hello?"

No response; he was alone on the ship.

Gray made a fast tour through the lander, sniffing as best he could, and squinting into the beam of his flashlight for the hint of smoke. But there was nothing. It seemed the only fire on the ship had been in the fire alarm panel itself—and now all those protection circuits were destroyed.

"Mighty fine," he said.

Where the hell was Chandler Young?

12

The circle of lights at the core of the central chamber was bigger and brighter. Progress had been made, after all. Gray hooked up his line crawler and sped off across the void. The spicy air was thick with ropes of floating muck, which the manta rays pursued energetically: A Killing had just wrapped. Thank God it was over.

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He found MacPhail struggling with a huge red coil of stiff video transmission cable. "Where's Young?"

MacPhail laughed. "For that matter, where's Captain Jones? You said I could get him to help me."

"I lied. Jones is pretty busy."

"But this is important."

"*Every*thing's important, MacPhail."

"Yeah? Then how come nobody takes any of it seriously?"

Gray laughed. "Tell me about it."

"I just wish you'd listen to what I have to put up with," said MacPhail, his cartoon voice starting to whine.

Gray coughed to hide his annoyance. He had a sudden impulse to slap the old man. (Sorry.) "I'm listening."

"For one thing, we just had a scheduled incident at the core, and I couldn't even get around in time to sequence the slo-mo cameras."

"We had ourselves a little incident on the primary lander, too. Seems as if—what's the matter?"

MacPhail had left the tangled clump of cable floating in the staging area. Now he was bent slightly at the waist, in freefall detent, puffing into his airmask.

"You all right?"

MacPhail waved him off, then pulled the mask down. "Sometimes I have trouble breathing." His head swung up, fixing Gray with the layered glare off his multiple glasses. "For God's sake, don't tell Chandler Young. If that bastard thought I was crapping out, he'd climb all over me."

Gray smiled.

Welcome to the club, brother.

13

He found Chandler Young sitting alone in Curtis Jones's private shuttle, peering at the floor. (Jones wanted to dump the Mars landers and haul one of the alien ships home for study—if he could get those big airlock doors open. Chandler called it grand theft. NASA was conferring in-house. Don't hold your breath.)

Gray said, "Go back to work, Young."

The guy wouldn't even look at him.

Gray said, "Where were you half an hour ago?"

No answer.

Gray leaned against the door ledge, staring inside. Young looked quite technically adept amongst the alien controls and equipment. But did he really have the expertise to screw up the primary lander's fire alarm panel? Maybe nobody had done anything. Maybe it had just been a freak accident. . . .

"You know, Chandler, it's going to be a long, long trip back—not to

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mention the quarantine. And we're all going to have to find some way to live with one another. Somehow."

Young kept studying the airlock's cluttered floor, concentrating hard, as if he were just about to figure it all out.

After a moment, Gray leaned in close and made sure the man was breathing. Satisfied, he leaned back out and laughed. Young flinched, but remained silent. "Chandler, I ain't peeked or nothing, but I'm pretty sure your dick is plenty long."

Young's face jerked around. "*What'd* you say?"

"What I *mean* is, you got nothing to prove to *me*." Young's surprised smile faded. "You made your stand," said Gray. "And I guess we all—pretty much—respect you for it. But now it's time to shut up and do the job we came here to do."

After a considerable silence, Gray said, "Don't you think so?"

No answer.

Gray shrugged, turning to leave.

Young said, "Half an hour ago the Hypers were busy at the sacrifice, killing another volunteer. If you must know, I was in here, crying."

Gray started to say something comforting, but realized he didn't know what that would be. Besides, he noticed the yellow plastic handle of a screwdriver sticking out of Young's breast pocket, and he couldn't help wondering if it was a number eight torx-head.

Was it too early to start an accident investigation . . . or too late?

"Get back to work," said Gray. "And I mean *right now*."

14

After Young had slunk off into the interior of Hyperion, Curtis Jones showed up at the far end of the airlock hangar and began sorting through the equipment for the cable hole.

Gray smiled. He'd been right after all: Jones *was* a busy man. He shuffled over and tapped him on the shoulder.

Jones turned, grinned, and pulled the headset off, taking care not to muss his hair. The headset dangled at his belt, blasting music. "We got a choice, Spike," he said. "We can run a bundle of video cables through the hole and mount the switching junk on the antenna, or we can dump the hardware right here, select the view from inside, and run only one video and one control line through the hole."

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to go home and jump on any well-tested chick that'll have me."

"Then the hell with it," said Gray. "Let's get out of here."

"Can we take Judy?"

"We'll see."

"Laurel and Hardy stay, of course."

"Fer sure."

"Goddamn civilians."

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"You got *that* right."

Captain Jones smiled, scratching his jaw. When he saw Gray watching, he said, "I guess I need a shave."

Gray smiled. It was true: A day's growth didn't go well with the captain's beautifully starched jumpsuit. But what the hell. "Hey, man, *I* don't care. I'm not the goddamn morale officer. You're too clean as it is. I mean, you make the rest of us look like—"

"I tried to shave. I *wanted* to shave, I really did."

"Hey, I believe you."

Jones laughed, then scratched harder at the underside of his reddened jawline. "It's just this damn itch!" he said, through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, I know. I got it, too: on my neck and under my arms. I'm afraid to look at my balls."

"Me, too! I mean—"

"You *ought* to be afraid to look at my balls."

"That's not—"

"Yeah, I know what you mean. This whole place is one humongous case of crotch rot. We may *never* get out of quarantine."

Jones stopped scratching his face, leaving bright welts beneath the beard stubble. He looked comically alarmed. "Oh, God, don't say that, Spike, even as a joke."

"Sorry."

Gray didn't know if it was a joke or not. The way things were going, he wouldn't make it *into* quarantine, let alone back *out* of it. This goddamn place was eating him alive.

Jones had an idea. "Hey, we might bring back a cure for the HIV people."

"Either that or the next ten mutations."

The captain frowned. "Oh . . ."

Gray said, "Did the Old Lady say anything to you about a stand-up?"

"No. Why?"

"She wanted us to do one, but that was yesterday. I was kind of hoping she'd forget."

"Why? Let's do it, Spike. I'm ready."

"I hate that crap."

"It's fun."

"It's degrading, hyping the project like a pack of PR goons."

Jones laughed. "Part of the job, these days. Money is tight, you know."

"Yeah, right."

"If you want to do one, I'll be here."

"You *want* to go on TV?"

"Sure."

"With that beard?"

Jones fingered his chin. "Oh, I forgot. Maybe I could try—"

"Just kidding. I'll think about it."

"I'll interview you."

"They don't want to know what *I* think. Trust me."

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"Whatever."

Jones went back to his drilling rig. Ultrasound testing had put the thickness of Hyperion's skin at twenty-eight centimeters. Jones had a long, thin pilot drill in the chuck, and a pile of vacuum patches for when he broke through. He lifted the throbbing headset to his ears, then let it dangle from his neck, looking at Gray to see if their conversation was over.

"Yeah," Gray said, "get to it. Time's running out."

"I'll just be glad when we're out of here, and on our way back home."

"You said it."

"We should have gone to Mars."

"We trained for Mars."

"Then we should have gone, Spike. Screw this place."

"At the very least."

Jones fingered his headset for a moment. "You know what bothers me? I worry about all those antiprotons, getting loose or something before we can use 'em."

"Yeah."

Without the weapons-grade antimatter, this mission would not have been possible. It took a shitload of delta-vee to climb above the ecliptic, then match orbits with this hyperbolic wanderer. It would take an even bigger jolt to get loose and headed back to Earth.

Jones nodded, said, "See ya later, Spike," and closed himself within his music. He hiked the pantlegs of his starched jumpsuit, protecting the crease as he crouched, then hefted the drill motor, studying the plastic bull's-eye template he'd gunked to the wall. The motor whined, sounding like one of Hyperion's angry gnats.

15

Gray watched Jones drill for a few minutes, "supervising." Then his radio crackled. Oh, man: It was Colonel Liang.

"I've just been talking to Chandler Young," she said. "He says he wants more time."

"Well—"

"That's more time than *you* gave him. What the hell does he mean by that?"

"He—"

"What time did you give him? And where did you *get* the time you gave him?"

"I told him—"

" 'Cause it sure looks like you're giving him *my* time, Gray."

"I just said he could—"

"There *is* no more time, Gray."

"I know that. He just needed to—"

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"He said you gave him time to explore some little project of his own. Tell me you didn't do that, Gray."

"Well, not exactly. I said—"

"Why isn't he working?"

"He *is* working. He's—"

"MacPhail says he's not working."

"Young's got this problem that—"

"I've got a problem, Gray. And guess what? My problem is *you*. Listen to me: I want this thing cleared up. Find Young and put his ass to work. And I don't mean tomorrow. There ain't no tomorrow, Gray."

"I know what you want."

"I'm gratified to hear that. So there's no reason why you can't do it, right?"

"Right. It's just that—"

"That sounds like the beginning of an excuse, Gray. You want to be careful not to start sentences like that."

The radio hissed, then squelched out. One good thing: She'd forgotten to ask about the stand-up. Gray took a breath of pure oxygen from his emergency tanks and looked around. Curtis Jones was bent over the whining drill motor, his lips popping to the silent music.

Gray had never felt so isolated in his life.

16

Distance to the sun: 12.15 million miles
Velocity: 103.19 miles per second
Time to ETD: 15 hours 38 minutes

Gray found MacPhail wedged in front of the miniature video switcher, checking the input from half a dozen cameras.

"Where's Young?" Gray asked, puffing rapidly. "Did he, come back?"

MacPhail looked at him and smiled.

He knows, thought Gray. He sees me huffing and puffing and snorting like a beached walrus—and he knows I'm already smack up against my limit. How am I going to make him do what I want now?

MacPhail said, "Chandler's around, some of the time."

"Has he been, helping out?"

"Just barely."

That's not what he told Liang . . . if Liang wasn't lying to Gray.

The old man nodded unhappily. "We're about set for—oh, look."

A string of fat Hypers emerged from the darkness beyond the gridwork of cameras and lights. Their moist bodies quivered and hissed, sucking and blowing air to maneuver themselves into a circle. They looked like shiny pink beads on a string.

Gray glanced at his watch. Dios! Too late to duck out now. "Don't they

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know they're being watched? They come to the same place, right in the middle, of the lights. Don't they know—"

He stopped, out of breath. He'd have to think of shorter sentences from now on.

"This is the center, colonel, and zero gee might be important. Or maybe the air currents are just right here."

Gray nodded. "Maybe."

"Or the scent, or something. If we get enough data, we may someday figure it out."

Gray pointed, his stomach churning with tension. "There he goes."

The Hypers had selected their guy, and he entered the center of the circle. The creature began to spin, whipped along by his ringed buddies, their transparent filaments flashing in the glare of the lights.

MacPhail was busy with the multideck recorder, the monitors lit up with various views of the aliens: true color, false color heat-mapped, high definition black-and-white, and so on. Gray looked around for Young, but didn't see him.

In the center of the circle, the lucky fellow was spinning himself into a frenzied blur, urged on by his compatriots, who whistled and clicked and groaned and shrieked. Each of them spun at a cocked angle, like little pink Saturns in a circle.

Or a crown of thorns.

When he thought that, Gray started to smile. Then the whipping cilia thickened, turning to knives.

Oh, shit.

He knew he didn't want to see this. He let go of the safety net, allowing himself to be nudged outward by the centrifugal motion of the slowly turning carousel of cameras and lights. He drifted into the darkness beyond the halo of light, where perhaps MacPhail wouldn't notice him, and closed his eyes.

But instantly he became disoriented, and his heart sped up. A cool mist bathed his face, and that felt good, until he realized it was Hyper slime flowing from the sacrificial victim. Oh, Christ, not that! He could feel his skin heating up again, shrinking away from the wet mist.

In the middle of that, MacPhail began to swear like a trucker on strike.

Gray's eyes snapped open—onto blackness. Some bastard had cut the lights!

"Oh, shit shit shit *shit* . . ." he said, sweeping the air in front of him. Something touched his shoulder, and he flinched into a ball. The manta rays were diving at him! A buzzing thing brushed his ear in an intimate caress. His hands flew up, found nothing. He shuddered in delayed reaction, wanting the hell out of there. Twenty feet away in the dark, the Hypers brought their chant to a climax. He heard a juicy explosion of guts, and his face was drenched in spicy muck radiating from the center.

He clenched his jaw to keep from screaming. Please PLEASE get me out of here!

He began to make out large shapes in the glowing darkness . . . rising,

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falling, moving closer, now retreating, square-shaped forms that circled silently on wide, fluttering wings. The bones of his neck whined and throbbed. The rays . . .

Something banged into him again, but before he could yell, MacPhail beat him to it, screaming in his ear.

Gray said, "Take it easy. It's me!"

He heard a nervous laugh, felt the old man's minty breath on his throat. Their safety glasses smacked together, then a hand gripped his arm.

"Sorry," MacPhail said, backing off. "I got spooked." His voice was strong and deep. He'd been at the oxygen.

The old man finally produced a flashlight and turned it on. "Forgot I had it," he said, then pointed the beam at Gray's own tethered flashlight, flapping against his belt like a thick black truncheon. MacPhail made a face, cocking his head to an accusative, though amusing, angle.

Gray slumped, trying for a comic effect. "Okay, you got me. I hereby resign my commission."

"What *I* want to know," said MacPhail. "Is where's Chandler Young?"

17

They found him in the Green Room, all by himself, eating a candy bar in the dark. Ten feet away stood the breaker box for the power cables that wound through Hyperion from the airlock hangar. While MacPhail glared at Young, flashlight burning into his calm face, Gray opened the front of the box and found the main breaker tripped.

"Is it off?" MacPhail asked.

"No, it's tripped."

"Then he made it trip."

Gray remembered the screwdriver handle sticking out of Young's pocket. He looked: It was gone, now. "Maybe."

Chandler drifted over, eyes wide with indignation. "I never touched it. The lights just went out."

"All by themselves," MacPhail said, with cartoon sarcasm. "Gad."

Young just chewed on his candy bar, waiting for the rest of it.

"If you saw the lights go out," Gray said, "why didn't you reset the breaker?"

Young grinned, his large teeth dark with chocolate. Alien gnats swarmed nearby, attracted by his sweet breath, and he gently shooed them away with his hand. "Wouldn't that be dangerous? Suppose one of you guys was in the middle of getting electrocuted?"

"But we weren't," said Gray.

"Still," said Young. "There could be a short in the circuit, out there."

"Could be," Gray said, pulling off a glove. He flicked the latch, snagged the zero-gee fingerholds, and depressed the breaker switch with his

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thumb. The Green Room monitor blossomed into life, and he could see the center of the chamber fill with light. No short in the system.

Young laughed. "That doesn't prove anything."

MacPhail said, "He's ruining the mission."

"It's not me!"

"Shut up!" said Gray, putting his glove back on. "Both of you. I'm tired of this shit. If we don't finish up and get the hell out of here, we're all going to die."

"*They're* all dying!"

"Who *says* they're dying?" Gray took a deep breath of oxygen. "For all we know, this little ceremony may be part of their life-cycle. Maybe the fat Hypers are just a larval stage of something we can't figure out. Maybe their guts turn to spiders in the dark, and the spiders grow up to be manta rays, and the manta rays shrink down to become the gnats, and the gnats swell up to become the fat guys, and before you know it—"

"Don't be stupid," Young said.

Gray noticed MacPhail smiling.

"The point is," said Gray, "we don't know *what* is going on here."

"Exactly!" said Young. "So how can we justify coming in here and tearing the place up?"

Gray wanted to scream. "Chandler, you idiot! We're not tearing the place up! All we're doing is setting up a few lousy lights and cameras so we can examine—"

"What? Like making plaster casts of a snowflake? Or burning a book to read its spectra?"

"Gad!" said MacPhail.

"We don't know how sensitive they are," Young said. "Maybe their need for privacy is essential to life. What right have we to—"

"Bullshit!" MacPhail was breathing hard, but he had to answer Young. "You're cutting the, heart out of science. How can you ever, know how sensitive a, thing is until you, investigate it? How can you—oh, shit! I can't talk!"

Young was excited. "Maybe science is too destructive, too aggressive, too damn arrogant. Always digging and tearing at things, always—"

"Shut up!"

"Tell him, Colonel. We—"

"You too, MacPhail!" said Gray. His head vibrated with spiking pain. "Jesus Christ, why did they have to send us all the way out here with a couple of intellectual geeks? Talk, talk, talk! Why can't you just *shut up* and do your fuckin' job? Would that be too much to ask?"

MacPhail said, "Colonel—"

Gray's glare silenced him. "I ought to lock you both up and string the TV cables myself, but we don't have the time. Don't you know we have to be off this stinking hunk of meat in . . ." checking his countdown watch ". . . fifteen hours twenty-two minutes? If we don't we're going to die, we're going to burn up, we're going to fuckin' *cook!*"

Both men stared at him, and he felt like a specimen. He had the

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disorienting sensation that in one second those two enemies were going to break into a friendly discussion of his erratic but fascinating behavior.

He wished Colonel Liang could see the crap he had to put up with—but the Old Lady was only interested in results. On the other hand, what if Young were *right?* Did that matter? Did it matter at all?

Gray looked at his watch again, trying to figure something out. "Okay, here it is: a compromise. Young, starting now you get eight hours—" He could distinctly see Liang's astonished face, but he passed right over it, because he knew he'd never tell her. "—Eight hours, Young, to find proof that we're a threat to the Hypers. And MacPhail, you're going to get Curtis Jones—this time for real—and, if I can swing it, Judy Taves-Roth, too. I want you to finish the set-up."

Young shook his head. "It doesn't make sense to let him continue hauling in more hardware if we're not going to have time to—"

"Okay, you're right."

"Good."

"You just lost four hours."

Young's mouth opened wide.

Gray turned to MacPhail. "As for you, think about how long it would take to clear everything out." The old man's face blubbered into a protest, but Gray waved him off. "That's *it!*"

He lurched out of the Green Room and onto Highway One, headed up the dark tunnel. He just had to get away from those guys. Talk, talk, talk: It was driving him nuts. Besides, he wanted desperately to scrub his face where the alien slime had begun to harden.

Chandler Young yelled after him. "Are you saying you'll agree to abort the mission?"

Gray heard MacPhail answering Young: "He never said that!"

"Yes, he *did!*"

"It's not his decision to *make!*"

Their voices faded into the distance. Gray's head was spinning.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . . sunlight glinting off the bottom . . .)

Jesus Christ, get me the fuck *out* of this!

18

He was so freaked that halfway back to the airlock hangar he missed a turning and got lost. This tunnel was a new one, so fresh and shiny and wet it might have just opened. And that made him think, as he blundered through the slime, that a tunnel which opened fast might close off just as fast, leaving him trapped in a cul de sac . . . or worse.

His flashlight beam showed a galaxy of purple eyes gleaming in the distance. Now what? Amber eyes, he was used to. And the red-eyed spiders were practically pals. But *purple* eyes?

"God, I *hate* this place. . . ."

He tried to retrace his steps, but found only virgin tunnel full of dark

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turnings. He would have yelled for help, but he was afraid his voice might break . . . and he figured it was even money he would rip right down the middle if even a tiny crack began to open up.

He pried the corroded optical locator off his tool belt and looked at it. To use the locator this far from the true path, he'd have to shut off his flashlight—and that made him very unhappy, indeed. "Come on, Gray, do your job." He plugged in the earpiece, doused the light, and pointed the locator all around in the pitch-black tunnel, listening to the scratchy tones in his earphones. If a hint of the tell-tale marker glowed from any direction, the locator couldn't find it. "Son of a bitch."

He was concentrating so hard on the squeal in the earphone—hoping so hard he'd find his way out of this fucking hellhole—that he didn't know how long it had been there before he noticed the cold, bony hand on his knee.

"Christ!"

He tossed the locator away, frantically grabbing for the flashlight. The hand was gone. He rubbed his knee, trying to scrape it clean again, and looked up the tunnel. He heard a noisy wet scramble as a couple dozen fat blue spider crabs retreated into the muck.

Well, fine, that made it easy. He snagged the dangling earpiece wire and ran off in the opposite direction, dragging the worthless locator by its tail. In a few seconds, it swung around and smacked the sticky wall of the tunnel, sinking in. "Come *on!*" he yelled, yanking it loose.

He looked back to make sure the crabs hadn't started after him again, and saw a tunnel open up just for them. Inside he glimpsed a new chamber, full of salmon-colored light and vague, chugging machines. The opening closed up after the crabs, and he shook his head. They would never know *anything* about this damned place.

A few seconds later he found, quite by accident, a small quivering hole that was closing off. "Finally." He wriggled his way through, landing with his face against the cold rubber cover of a power cable. He was shaking.

He heard a shout behind him, and nearly jumped back through the drooling wall. It was Chandler Young.

19

"Dios!" Gray said, heading off down Highway One. "I can't *talk* now!"

"Please!" said Young.

"Not now!"

He led Young almost all the way to the hangar before slowing up and stopping. At least he had his breath back under control. He squatted against the wet, curving wall and took a casual sip of oxygen. His feet itched; that was something new. "Make it fast. I'm not as patient as I used to be."

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Young looked tormented. "I don't think there is any way I can prove my thesis."

Gray made a face of mock bewilderment. "Then what do you want *me* to do?"

"Act on the possibility."

"Just pretend it's true?"

Young nodded. "Because if I'm *right,* it would be tragic to ignore their suffering. And if I'm *wrong* . . ."

". . . it's just another mission, right?" Gray clenched his toes, trying to scratch the bottoms of his feet against the inner soles of his boots.

Young watched for a moment, then said, "I'll take the responsibility."

Gray smiled and shook his head. "But it doesn't work that way. I know you've been talking to Colonel Liang. . . ." You sneaky son of a bitch. "Try again, why don't you?"

"She won't listen to me and you know it."

"Damn it, Young, that's just the *point!* What good would it do you to convince *me?* 'Cause then *I'd* just have to convince—look, if it makes you feel any better, she doesn't listen to *me,* either."

"So what? Is it fair to condemn them just because they can't bring themselves to come to us and tell us their problems?"

"Shit." Gray sat right down in the muck and banged the bottoms of his boots together. Two, three, four times . . . hard! Now the itch had turned to stinging. For Hyperion, call it progress. "Do you have any *idea* how much all this is costing?"

"Who cares?!" Chandler Young looked as if he were about to cry.

Gray groaned. Oh, God, Young. Don't do this to me. But he wondered: Was the guy that much more sensitive? That much more . . . human?

Young was saying, ". . . spend a chunk of money and that means they all have to die?"

"Chandler . . ."

"Is that it? Is this the new rule men live by?"

Gray shook his head. What made that guy think it was a *new* rule? "Find me some proof, Chandler. The flimsier, the more transparent, the stupider, the better. I'm easy. Ask Judy. But find me some proof I can take to the Old Lady—anything I can use to explain why we ought to dump the mission and go home early." He got back up in a crouch, feet tingling.

"Just get me proof."

"I can't! The Hypers won't cooperate!"

"Do the best you can."

"But I . . ."

Chandler squeezed his eyes shut. He shook his head, and several tears broke loose and flew away. Gnats swarmed after the tiny silver globes to have a look.

"I really gotta go now." Gray pushed off into the boggy tunnel, his feet stinging, his head pounding.

Was there no way out of this?

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20

He called the skipper in her goddamn airlock hideaway and lied through his teeth, telling her Young was back on the job. He cut her off in a hurry, trying to sound busy as hell: Sorry, no time to discuss stand-ups.

He got Judy on the radio, giving her the news, begging for cooperation. She resisted, sounding pissed, but finally gave in, as long as everybody understood her assignment to MacPhail's team was temporary. "I promise," said Gray, and he didn't care if he were lying or not. Fuck it.

He then rounded up Curtis Jones at the borehole. "How'd you like a little change of pace?"

Jones waved a broken drill bit in Gray's face. "I'd say it was about fuckin' time!"

Gray smiled. He'd never seen Jones so lathered. Strands of sweaty hair drooped down across his forehead.

"Tough going?"

"*Oh,* yeah!" Jones said. "First of all, this wall is layered: Every few centimeters you got different density stuff. That alone drives you nuts. But the real problem is the squeeze factor. You get to drilling along and everything's great—until the motor starts to lug. The bit's getting grabbed, see? The son-of-a-bitchin' wall is tightening up on it!"

"Go see MacPhail in the core. He'll put you to work."

"Glad to, Spike." Jones dialed back his music deck. "Does this have anything to do with Chandler Young?"

"Doesn't everything?"

"Goddamn civilians."

21

Gray worked alone on the cable borehole for a few hours, shifting his weight back and forth from one stinging foot to the other. Jones was right: It was slow going, varying the motor speed, bearing down one minute, letting up the next, cleaning bits—or replacing the ones that snapped—but it felt good to sweat over a problem he could actually work on.

Trouble was, it didn't last.

During a break, as he gnawed on a chunk of high-energy low-residue simulated food bar, he realized he'd have to go back inside and see what Young was up to. His unofficial time for finding proof was almost up, and that meant Gray would have to listen to another of his marathon whine-fests.

Oh, yeah. Let's go see what Chandler Young is doing.

The idea made him so sick he didn't move an inch until he'd finished every scrap of the evil-tasting food bar.

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22

Distance to the sun: 11.20 million miles
Velocity: 105.30 miles per second
Time to ETD: 12 hours 55 minutes

When Gray reached the Green Room, MacPhail and Curtis Jones were headed out. Judy Taves-Roth was inside; Young was nowhere to be seen.

"Break over?" asked Gray.

MacPhail ignored him, brushing past. Curtis said, "No rest for the wicked. You know that, Spike. How's the borehole?"

"It's a nightmare!"

Jones laughed. "Sounds familiar." He followed MacPhail toward the void, hand on his shoulder, calling him "Spike."

Gray shook his head, then turned to look at Judy. "I thought I was the only one he called 'Spike.' "

"Are you kidding? He calls *me* 'Spike.' He calls *everybody* 'Spike.' "

"Damn."

Why had he never noticed that? It was stupid, but he felt betrayed, somehow, his sense of exclusivity stretched thin enough to wrap the universe. Now he was just one more "Spike" among the clamoring multitude of "Spikes."

He hung in the Green Room's entrance, smiling like a dork. "It's a kind of a letdown, you know? Not being the only Spike."

Judy shrugged, looking bored. Beside her, a small robot camera platform slouched against the glistening wall. NASA planned for the robot to roll through the ant-farm corridors of Hyperion after they'd gone, sending back pictures of the million little caves they wouldn't have time to explore. Unfortunately, the interior of this place was a swamp, and the robot's wheels kept jamming up with muck. From time to time, Curtis Jones tinkered with it, but the stupid thing was definitely a no-go. (Some guys at JPL were trying to design a retro-fit walking machine, to be assembled on site out of ship's stores. Nobody was counting on that.)

Gray checked his watch.

Judy said, "Next show in twenty-eight minutes."

They were alone. He drifted over and tugged at the collar of her black overalls. "Hey, look out, babe. Your suit's coming off."

She looked herself over, frowning. "No, it's not."

"Now don't argue with me. My mind's made up."

First she seemed perplexed, then just annoyed. "That old joke?"

"So I'm running out of material. Give me a break; I've got a lot of personal problems."

Feeling lame, he retreated several feet and pretended to examine the little robot. Oh, yeah: Things were really working out. . . .

"How's it coming?" he asked, looking back at her over his shoulder. "You like working with MacPhail?"

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"I can think of more interesting jobs. How come you're not working?"
"I'm supervising."
"Is that what you call it?"
"It's right there in the manual."
Her smile came and went in a flash. "Seriously, I think Chandler's losing it."
"I'm not surprised."
"I mean it."
Gray swiveled to look at her. "He's so . . . affected, you know? With his silly moustache and that phony Ivy League accent."
"What accent?"
"I don't know. It's just a kind of . . . I don't know."
"What's the matter? Doesn't he sound black enough for you?"
"That's not it, and you know it!"
"He's not the only one."
"What do you mean?"
" 'Affected,' to use your word."
"Who's affected?"
"*You* are."
"Me? I'm not the least bit affected."
"Yeah? So why is it always 'Dios' this and 'Dios' that? You're not Latino. You're Wonder Bread."
"It's just an expression."
"An expression that sounds a little funny, coming from a stone gringo like you."
Gray frowned, turning to study the core monitor. He thought: There must be a goddamn sign on my back. (Fuck me over, *please*.) "Is he around here?"
"Young?"
"Yeah."
"Comes and goes."
"Uh-hunh."
On the monitor, he saw Jones and MacPhail hauling fat reels of bright red video cable along the transit lines. Three pale blue manta rays swooped down behind them, veering off at the last moment, forming a starburst pattern as they flapped away. Stunt flying from the Hyperion Air Force. What next?
Judy said, "The word is we might be going home early."
Gray looked over from the screen. "Devoutly to be wished, lady."
"Is it true?"
"Nobody knows."
He moved close again, reaching out to touch her red hair, unsheathed for the moment. "Where's Miss Piggy?"
"Don't," she said, jerking her head back. "Your gloves are filthy."
"Sorry, miss. Hey, do your feet itch at all?"
"No."
"Don't they sting or anything?"

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"No, they don't."

" 'Cause mine sure—"

"Shut up a minute, will ya? They say we might be yanking all the cameras."

"That's Young's little theory."

"And?"

"I don't know."

"You aren't going to say, are you?"

"Can't say till I know, babe."

She was getting mad, and he didn't like the way her age showed on her face. Thirty-three, she was—two years older than he—born the day *Challenger* blew up. Named after Judith Resnik, and so forth. Maybe she could blame her parents for putting her in this mess. Gray was still looking around for someone to blame.

He pointed at the squeeze bottle of freefall electrolytes in her hand. "Can I have a sip?"

She cocked her head.

"Please," he said.

She didn't move. "This is your official Air Force look, isn't it?"

"It's just *me*, lady. Alexander Cameron Gray, Light Colonel. God help me, I'm a lifer. You don't like it, go find somebody else to jump on. If you haven't already."

She smiled, but it was like a door closing.

"Nice one."

Oh, shit. What's the matter with me? "Now how about that sip?" he said, pleading to get back in. He smiled. "I promise not to say 'Dios' for at least an hour."

She studied his face. "I never noticed before how much you hold things back. If you can't actually *be* in control, you gotta *pretend* you are. I guess I knew that, but it never before made you look so . . . unattractive."

"Hey, gramma, get your teeth out of my butt."

"Does Liang know what's going on in here?"

"She knows enough. I can handle her."

"Uh-huh." She reached over and pushed; they slowly separated in the minuscule spin-gravity. "Did you notice we were drifting apart, Colonel?"

"Funny lady."

In the tunnel opening, she tucked the juice bottle between her legs and pulled the crackling pink swim cap over her head. Miss Piggy was back. On the way out of the Green Room, Judy tossed the squeeze bottle into the air. "Guess what, Spike: It's empty."

After he'd caught the container, he looked back at the opening. She was gone.

Fine.

The hell with her.

He tore the top off and crushed the bottle. It *was* empty, but several drops broke loose and drifted away, pale spinning globes. He pursued them with his mouth, losing them in the darkness of the cave.

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23

Colonel Liang was waiting for him by the unfinished borehole. She was all bulked up in the last unbreached isolation suit; her amplified voice croaked with strain. "Report to me."

He told her things had picked up, that the cameras were nearly all in place, that they'd be finished in another six or seven hours: figure about half the time remaining.

She glared at him through her steamy faceplate, and he wondered if she already knew it was a lie—or whether she was deducing that fact right now from his own twitchy facial expression.

Surprisingly, she only nodded, and stared off across the hangar toward the dark mouth of Highway One.

Liang was the last crewmember still unexposed to the atmosphere of Hyperion; she'd never gone deeper than the sundeck and the alien shuttle hangar.

Gray didn't blame her.

"It really *is* important," she said, not looking at him. "We have to do our jobs—and we have to get safely home. If there's a conflict . . . if we can't do *both* . . ."

He nodded and said he knew.

It wasn't until she had gone back through the airlock, headed for the decon tanks and the relative safety of her little hideaway, that he realized he didn't know how she meant to end that sentence. Which was more important, the mission or their safety?

And why couldn't *he* figure it out?

24

Gray sat down on the lip of the alien shuttle's airlock and pulled off his gloves. As he opened the straps on his boots, it occurred to him Liang had again forgotten about the stand-up she'd asked him to tape. Well, the hell with it.

He was done worrying about the damned thing. It was probably too late now, anyway: Everybody was too busy to jerk around making happy talk for the "Today" show crowd.

He pried off his boots, then averted his head. Oh, *man!* His socks smelled like a sick dog's breath. When he peeled them off, he found a purplish oozing patch of skin on the bottoms of both feet. Oh, Christ, it was even worse than he'd imagined. Grimacing, he picked at the loose wound on his right foot, peeling back a thin sheet of wrinkled, moisture-whitened skin. His mouth watered with the sickening smell. Oh, God, I'm gonna throw up.

He slapped the airmask over his face, but even the cool oxygen didn't help. His insides turned hot and watery, filling him with a profound sense of dread. He wondered if he'd ever make it back.

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"If they *knew*," he whispered, dropping the mask, "they'd never let us back on Earth. They'd blow us out of orbit."

A million miles out.

Christ.

He pulled a crumpled tube of antibiotic gel from his jumpsuit pocket and squeezed the last of it onto the bottoms of both feet. Feed the alien fungus. "There you go, guys. This ought to make you grow up big and strong."

No need now to collect samples for the bio-war folks: Gray had become a walking (well, limping) arsenal of unearthly vermin.

Just call me Mr. Contamination.

Yeah, right.

When he was done rubbing in the gel, he realized he had no clean socks. "Well, shit."

He hesitated, then pulled the old socks back on, swapping them left to right, and wearing them upside-down. He wondered, as he jerked his boots up and closed the Velcro straps, if his oozing socks were infecting the tops of his feet now.

And so what?

"My body is a garden . . . a garden of alien delights." He laughed till it wasn't funny, then yelled: "Come on all you alien funguses, you neo-cancerous growths, you happy, happy off-planet microbes, get over here, guys, and party on me! Hey: I'm the perfect host!"

A stupid joke, but he laughed anyway, just for something to do. Call it behavior modification.

It wasn't working.

No way out, he kept thinking. No fuckin' way out.

25

Distance to the sun: 10.64 million miles
Velocity: 106.70 miles per second
Time to ETD: 11 hours 20 minutes

An hour later, Gray made his way back up that repulsive tunnel, scrabbling through the sludge, limping on his ruined feet, banging into burnt-out floodlights, swearing steadily, racing the spiders that snapped at his ears, hissing. Every one of the hand-lettered signs was gone, so he followed out the blue power cables, barely visible in the stinking muck.

Curtis Jones and Judy Taves-Roth were giggling in the Green Room, putting the Miss Piggy swim cap on the busted robot rover. "Having fun?" Gray asked. Before they could answer, he said, "Stay there. I'll be back in a minute."

"Is this it?" Jones asked.

"This is it!" Gray yelled over his shoulder.

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He rounded up Young and MacPhail at the floodlit core. Young had a battered Rambo lunchbox in his hands. He looked sick. His time was up and he knew it.

At least, Gray *hoped* he knew it. He turned first to MacPhail. "How long will it take to pull your stuff?"

"Impossible. It'd take days—if we're not going to ruin the equipment."

"So what you're saying is, we'd have to start immediately. And really tear into it."

Young got very excited. "Then we're going to *do* it? I mean, we're actually going to—"

"Gad, Chandler. It isn't up to *him*."

Gray ignored the old man. "I don't know yet. That's what I want you to talk about. Have you got your proof? What's in the lunchbox?"

Chandler shifted the box to the other side, away from either man. "I don't know if I'm ready to show this."

Gray stared at him, hard. "Well you better do *some*thing, pal. I can't sit on this forever. Show me *some*thing!"

"That's just it," MacPhail said. "He can't show you anything because there *is* no proof. And that's why we have to keep the cameras in place. There's no other way to find out. And hell, we might not *ever* find out."

Young turned away, fingering the plastic box. From his personal effects locker: a totem from his boyhood or something. Beneath the colorful lid, where a shirtless Rambo flexed and scowled, the body of the box was clear plastic, but scuffed nearly opaque by years of rough use. Even so, it looked to Gray to be filled up with something. Lunch, perhaps. Yeah, right: Maybe *that* was why he wouldn't show the damned thing.

Gray looked at his countdown watch. The next ritual sacrifice (if that's what the hell it was): coming up in twenty minutes. Cutting it mighty close, man. "C'mon, c'mon! What's in the box, Chandler? I know you said it would be hard to get proof. I promise I won't laugh."

Young's lips twitched. "Why would you laugh?"

"I don't know. Whip it out."

Young stared at the box for a moment, then pried the lid off. MacPhail shook his head at Gray. "It won't be anything, Colonel. There simply isn't anything extant."

Young frowned, aimed the empty box at the center of the chamber, and floated it away. Gray watched it go, wondering how the guy could be so casual with that box, which obviously meant a great deal to—

MacPhail shrieked, then started to laugh. Gray jerked around, grabbed a safety line to steady himself. Young was holding up a string of fist-sized blue crabs, stretched wide across his chest like a cannibal's necklace.

"That's it?" asked Gray. MacPhail was still laughing; Young looked savagely pissed.

Gray said, "What the hell is it?"

"What's it look like?" asked Young.

MacPhail managed to say, "This is so stupid!"

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"Well, you know . . ." Gray stared at the crabs. There was something weird about them. The feet of each crab looked different, the way the legs were bent or broken or—in some cases—missing altogether. It resembled one of those signs you see hung up on strings, the kind that spell out HAPPY BIRTHDAY or WELCOME HOME or whatever, one letter at a time. Was there a kind of primitive language here? "Where'd you find this?"

"On the other side," Young said, nodding behind him, across the central chamber. "I wasn't having any luck over here, so I took a chance. There are about a zillion unexplored tunnels and caves over there."

"Is that right?" MacPhail said, cheeks merry. Having fun with the whole thing.

Young ignored him. "I found a section where the walls are a kind of pale green color."

"Pale green, were they?" said MacPhail. "Sort of like a police station . . . or maybe a lunatic asylum?"

Young looked only at Gray. "In a cave, off one of these tunnels, I found an array of small puckered holes lining the wall, each perhaps two or three centimeters across."

MacPhail said, "Now what does *that* remind me of?"

Young said, "I noticed the holes were . . . vibrating."

"Oh, God," said MacPhail. "This just gets better and better."

"Shut up, MacPhail," said Gray. "Let him tell it."

Young's voice quivered, from rage or nervous tension, Gray couldn't tell. "When I brushed my hand against one of the holes, it opened wide."

MacPhail choked on an explosive laugh. He made a big show of removing his safety glasses and wiping tears from under his bifocals.

"Inside the hole," Young said, his voice rising, "I found strings like this one. All different. But all of them . . . organized . . . in the various bins."

"The Archive of Alien Assholes," said MacPhail. "Makes sense to *me*."

"Hey," said Gray. He looked at Young. "You're saying this is writing?"

Young nodded.

"Oh, come *on!*" said MacPhail.

"It is, old man!"

"It's a fake! *Obviously*."

"Shut up!"

MacPhail couldn't stop. "A cheap, stupid, *obvious* fake." He turned to Gray. "He knew he couldn't prove his ridiculous hypothesis, so now he's reduced to fabricating the data." Back to Young: "You make me sick."

"Old man—"

"Shut up, *both* of you." Gray reached out to examine one of the little blue crabs. It looked as delicate as a Christmas tree ornament: long slender fingers, jointed innumerable times, some full length, others broken off at the knuckes. It *could* be a code, couldn't it? How come MacPhail was so sure the necklace was a fake? Gray wiped his glove on his jumpsuit, then smelled the fingers. The odor was strong and spicy. He looked

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closer at the crab's leg. A dot of pink goop oozed from the broken joint. "This break is fresh."

"Uh-oh," said MacPhail. "The ink's not dry on your document."

Young looked flustered, trying to pull the string back. "That's no reason to think—"

"Fake fake *fake* fake!"

Singing it like a little song.

"Shut up, MacPhail," said Gray, pulling himself closer to Young.

"So . . . this string just happens to be recent," Young said, easing back. He collided with a video switching console, and glanced behind him.

Gray said, "I see."

"Besides, we don't know how long this stuff stays wet."

"Sure as shit, *you* don't," said MacPhail.

"Shut up," Young said.

"Fake fake *fake* fake—and not a very good one, either."

"MacPhail," said Gray.

"And even if it weren't a fake, what would it *prove?* Did you see one of the Hypers make the string? No, you did not—or are you going to change your story about the puckering buttholes?"

"Look," said Young. "You can't—"

MacPhail pushed on: "I tell you, Chandler, I wouldn't believe it if they wore the damned things around their necks . . . if they *had* necks."

Young tried to get his momentum back. "You can't prove the Hypers *didn't* manufacture this—"

"Guess what, Chandler?" the old man said. "You're finished. You pull this shit, you think it's a joke? You think you're going to say, 'Just fooling,' and take back your fake? It doesn't work that way, pal. I'm a witness. *He's* a witness." He pointed off in the distance. "*They* are witnesses."

Gray looked over, thinking the guy meant the Hypers were watching all this crap. But there was nobody there . . . just the glassy reflections from a couple video cameras. Uh-oh. "You're taping this?"

"Of course."

Now Young really *did* look sick. He spun around to the switcher console, and MacPhail lunged after him.

"It's too late, Chandler."

Young shrugged him off without turning.

"Take it easy, MacPhail," Gray said. "I don't think it's been established the crab thing is a fake." The old man looked at Gray as if betrayed, and Gray remembered how he'd hammered it home that Young was not to be coddled. Take no shit. God, no wonder he was jumping all over the crab necklace. MacPhail was bluffing! Gray shifted gears, trying to cover him. "On the other hand," he said, "if it *is* a fake . . ." He looked at the old man, nodding at Young: Go ahead, finish him!

MacPhail's lips tightened, and he turned toward Young. "Of *course* it's a fake, and he *knows* it. From now on, Chandler, you do what I tell you or I'll play the tape of this little incident for any university or television

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network that's interested. If that happens, you'll be disgraced, your career f-fucked. I don't want to hear another—"

"Shut up!"

MacPhail recoiled, as if this were the first time Young had yelled at him. He started to look at Gray, then stopped. He pointed a finger at Young. "The big humanist, the big bleeding heart. You *killed* those crabs to make that thing, didn't you? You *killed*—"

"I said: Shut *up!*"

"Just to prove a point, just to look good, just to pump up your own . . . fucking career, you *killed* those poor—"

"What do *you* know about it?"

"You're a fake, *that's* what I know!"

"I'm right about—"

"Murderer!"

"Shut up!"

"You just killed the little—"

"I mean it!"

"Killer killer *killer!*"

"Fuck you!" Young yelled, eyes wide. "Just *fuck* you!"

MacPhail snapped. He lunged right at Chandler Young, screaming nonsense.

"Don't!" Gray yelled.

Young's body twisted away, his clenched hand rushing forward. Something glittered between them, then they met, grappling. MacPhail went, "Ooooo . . . ," and Chandler Young was way up close, elbow jerking, reaching around, gripping the man's back. His mouth pressed against MacPhail's ear, whispering urgently. Sounded like: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. . . ."

"Stop it!" Gray yelled. He snagged the yellow transit line and pulled himself closer.

Too late. Chandler Young first blocked his way, then swung around. MacPhail spun away, trailing a string of dark globules. Young said, "It's over. . . ."

MacPhail bounced off the video switcher console, his head turning. He stared at Gray, eyes tracking as his body turned. "I win," he whispered. "I *win.*"

Young's eyes widened in confusion. Gray reached out, grabbed the front of Young's jumpsuit for leverage, and punched him twice in the teeth—and *damn,* didn't *that* feel good? In an afterthought, he yanked the weapon out of Young's open hand before it could drift away.

Gray clung to the stunned man, watching for a moment before slapping his hands away and shoving the airmask onto Young's bloody face. Gray held the metal shaft to the light: formerly a number eight torx-head screwdriver, its tip now blackened, pitted, arc-welded into a jagged point . . . and thickly plated with MacPhail's blood. Christ.

Gray looked up, breathless, craving his own airmask. Across the way, in the mouth of the S-curve, he saw several people watching. Judy Taves-

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Roth and Curtis Jones, apparently. He couldn't read their expressions from here.

He turned. At the center of the void, the Hypers were beginning to assemble for the Killing. Oh, no, not yet!

MacPhail drifted off into the darkness, still pumping out the spinning globes of blood. Not dead yet, but dying fast. To Gray he looked like a diver dropping through a shaft of dark water, his air bubbles sparkling red.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . .)

26

Distance to the sun: 9.26 million miles
Velocity: 110.76 miles per second
Time to ETD: 7 hours 29 minutes

He finally found Judy at the solar lab panel, making gamma-ray spectra. She looked up and said, "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"I know you're running around, trying to get everybody to string TV cables for you. Don't ask me, okay?"

"You're involved, too."

"I'm Science."

"This *is* science. And don't forget: Colonel Liang says we can't leave until the cameras are all set."

"Just don't ask. I did my bit, now I'm busy."

She turned back to the computer screen, which was blank except for the message: TEST RUNNING . . .

Still pissed at him, locking him out. He rubbed the knuckles of his right hand. Despite the heavy leather glove, he'd split his skin on Young's teeth. Already the hand itched with infection: Hyperion offering its opinion. After a moment he said, "I guess you think I should have gone after him, that I could've saved him somehow."

"I'm sure it was too late."

"Well, it was."

"I know. I just said so."

"Well, you could've sounded a little more convincing."

She turned to look at him. "Settle down, Alex. You'll live longer."

"You wanna bet?"

"Are you really going to run those cables?"

"I have to."

"What about what Chandler says?"

"You think he's right?"

"I have no idea."

"Then the hell with Chandler. I have my orders."

"Sure you do."

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"What do you mean by that? You think he's right, don't you?"

She turned back to the screen. "I told you I don't know. Now leave me alone."

That damned door again, slamming in his face.

27

The only place on Hyperion with a lock was a large cabinet they'd brought over and set up on the sundeck to store precision optical instruments. Gray tugged aside the airhose that had been stuffed inside, along with a power line for lights, and opened the door.

"What the hell am I going to do with you?"

"I'd say you've already done it," said Young. "The question is: What are you going to do about the mission?"

"It's not my decision, Chandler. It's Liang's."

"Did you tell her what I said?"

"She doesn't want to hear it."

Young looked crushed.

Gray said, "You didn't make it any easier, you know."

"You've got to convince her."

"Me?"

"Nothing is more important."

"Wrong. Getting home is important."

"What are you risking?" Young asked, in a mocking tone. "A good talking-to?"

Gray didn't answer, and they stared at each other for a moment, Gray's right hand tingling. Finally he said, "You tripped the breaker with that torx-head screwdriver, didn't you?"

"It was easy: I just opened the back and shorted across the terminals."

"Made a nice big spark, right?"

"How'd you know?"

"I saw the way the tip looked."

"Yeah. Scared the shit out of me."

"Same thing with the lander's fire alarm panel?"

"More or less. I almost didn't get out of here before you came bouncing in."

"Yeah, well, you got my attention."

"I'll bet."

"I was pretty sure it was you, but I didn't know if you could do stuff like that."

"Screwing things up is easy."

Gray nodded. "Yep."

Young watched him, looking amused.

Gray said, "Jesus, Chandler, did you have to *kill* the man?!"

"I don't know what happened," Young said, his smile collapsing. "When I showed him that crab thing, I really thought he'd back me up, come

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in on my side. Give me the benefit of the doubt, and all that. I'm not wrong, you know. I just couldn't find any way to . . . prove it. I *told* you that. I warned you, remember? Do your best, you said. God. Do my best! So I hoped . . . I hoped . . . I don't know. Actually, I'd done it before, you know, given him that push when he needed it. This time he just wouldn't budge. He was like a rock."

Gray thought: That was me; I did that. I backed him up so hard he had no way to turn.

"What about that necklace? Did you make it yourself?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you did."

Young said nothing.

"What about the crabs?" asked Gray. "Was MacPhail right? *Were* they alive when you found them?"

Young's lips tightened. "I don't want to talk about the crabs."

"A sacrifice, is that it?"

Young said nothing.

"Forget it," said Gray.

They stared off in different directions. Gray was thinking about the nature of sacrifices. He wondered if *any*body was going to get out of this alive.

"I don't know what happened at the end," Young said, some time later. "It's like he went crazy or something." He looked at Gray, smiled briefly. "I guess you could say he was on a sacred quest for knowledge."

"Whereas you are on a different sacred quest."

"Apparently." Young looked away again, mumbling something.

"What?"

"I said: What difference does it make? They're all going to die."

"Maybe they're *supposed* to die."

Chandler Young laughed bitterly. " 'There are things man was not meant to fool with.' "

"Maybe."

"The thing is, we already *have* fooled with this thing. But now we have a chance to pull out before we tear it all up."

"And if you're wrong, we've risked the lives of everyone here for nothing."

"We're not the only beings here who have lives to risk."

Gray laughed. "Talking to you makes my head hurt."

"It's good for you."

"Is that right?"

"Do you know anything about poetry?"

Poetry? Gray looked at him, smiling, unsure he'd heard right. "Poetry?"

"Yeah."

"Like: 'There was a young man from Nantucket'?"

"Not exactly."

"Or how 'bout: 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever'?"

Young looked astonished. "You know Keats?"

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Gray laughed. "Yeah, we met in college. 'A thing of beauty . . .' That's the first line of *Endymion* . . . and the only line I can remember. I don't think I got very far in that thing. It's long."

"I know. It's over four thousand lines. I read it on the way here."

"What a coincidence."

"Not at all. I remembered he'd written poems about Hyperion, so—seeing as how I was coming here—I brought a disc of his complete poems. 'To the eastern gates,' it says. That's where Hyperion housed the sun when he wasn't riding it through the heavens. And that's where we're headed, 'to the eastern gates,' to meet the sun."

"Not if I can help it."

Gray felt the skin on his forehead tighten. These days, anything to do with meeting the sun . . .

Young said, "There's something in *The Fall of Hyperion* you should hear. It's about the poet as a special kind of dreamer: a dreamer who can still see the miseries of the world. You know? He sees the miseries of the world and they just won't let him go."

"And you see yourself as the poet, right? The only one who knows what's going on. The only one who can see the miseries. You're the dreamer."

"In dreams begin responsibilities."

"Yeah, I heard *that* one, too. What you keep forgetting, pal, is that I have responsibilities of my own to look out for."

"Your duty."

"That's right."

"And your career."

"If I handle the first one, the second takes care of itself."

Chandler Young frowned. "What if it had all been different? What if the Hypers had come right up and said howdy and we had all sat down and yakked about the universe, you know—as one sentient creature to another? What would you say to that?"

"I'd say that's what we came here for. That's what we all *hoped* would happen."

"All right, suppose that's exactly what happened—only suppose one of the Hypers couldn't handle the shock of meeting us, and he went crazy and ate a spider and died."

Gray smiled. "Ate a spider?"

"Would that bother you? If one of them died simply because we showed up?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Kinda like: Jeez, we had no right to make the little guy croak."

Gray nodded. "Okay, okay, I get your point."

"Because when monsters show up, there's bound to be *some*body going nuts."

"And we're the monsters, right?"

"*We* are. *They* are. Everybody's a monster to *some*body."

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"So I guess we monsters will just have to be real careful not to freak one another out."

"But somebody is *always* going to freak out. Don't you see? The shock is always going to be too big for somebody."

"So how are the monsters of the universe ever going to get together, if everybody is so careful not to damage anybody?"

"That's just the point, Alex. Nobody *is* getting together. They're not even trying to call each other on the radio. But we *know* they're out there, don't we? That's Fermi's Paradox. And that's the difference between us and them."

"What is?"

"They're more *considerate* than we are."

Gray shook his head. "You think too much."

"I dream too much."

Me too, thought Gray.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . .)

28

Distance to the sun: 8.10 million miles
Velocity: 115.05 miles per second
Time to ETD: 4 hours 19 minutes

"I'll splice it," Gray said. "You guys just keep on dumping it out."

Jones and Judy Taves-Roth both saluted, then disappeared up the tunnel, thick red video cable spooling off the core behind them.

"Very funny!" Gray yelled. He heard their giggles fade. They were headed out. Lucky bastards.

Gray sat down cross-legged in the muck and got to work stripping the insulation off the ends of the cables. Bring two more video lines out from the central chamber and they'd be through with the installation. So why wasn't he feeling better? Why was his chest so tight? It was almost over, right?

He was nearly done wrapping the splice with heat shrink when one of the fat Hypers oozed past him in the narrow tunnel.

"Hey pal!" Gray yelled at him. "Am I bothering you?"

The Hyper paused a few feet up the tunnel, cilia rippling at the bundle of video cables. Sniffing?

Gray said, "Are you like *freaked* just 'cause I'm in here? I really want to know."

The Hyper whistled, then wobbled and bounced up the tunnel without further comment.

"You sure?" Gray yelled after him.

No comment.

"If *he* won't complain," Gray muttered, working the heat gun over the splice, "how can *I* be wrong?"

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Easy.

He painted the splice with thick black gunk, tie-wrapped the new cable to the bundle, and got to his aching feet. He collected his splicing tools in the kit, and headed for the void, still mumbling to himself. Two more lines.

Everywhere he went he saw the evidence of their occupation: cameras, power cables, extra lighting, air samplers, call boxes, emergency air tanks, trash nets, zip-sealed crapper bags, and just plain litter on the loose. Three and a half days inside Hyperion, and the place was fast filling up with human junk.

What if Young were *right?* What if it all had to be cleaned out? Was there enough time for that? Even if they started right away? And when was Liang going to decide? Jones said she'd been on the radio to NASA, laying out Young's thesis. And the word was, she had slanted things in MacPhail's direction.

Was that wrong? Did *any* of this matter?

Gray couldn't decide. The whole thing made his head spin, and every time he tried to concentrate, he felt himself falling, dragged underwater by the weight of Hyperion. He thought: It's *already* too late. I've got brain damage. Some damn alien fungus has got inside my head and rotted out my brain.

29

When he looked up from his depressing reverie, he found himself in the S-curve, at the opening to the central chamber. Across the murky gulf, the Hypers were gathering in the light. He counted ten of them. One more and they'd have the quorum.

He checked his watch. They were early again. The Killings were coming faster and faster.

He started to turn, to get the hell out of there—when one of the fat Hypers pushed past him, going out. "Hey!" yelled Gray. "You don't want to go out there!"

The alien in fact did not go out to the center, but stayed on the inside wall, "sniffing" the black knobs that lined the void.

"Good. Stay there, pal. It's a lot safer."

Gray hung in the safety web, watching the Hyper. Despite high-speed cameras monitoring the Killing, very little was known about the creatures' internal structure. No "bones" had ever been found, not even floppy bags of emptied skin. (Maybe the spiders nibbled them down to nothing.) There had always been a lot of talk about the possibility of specimen collection, of transportation back to Earth—dead or alive. There had even been rancorous discussions of on-site dissection (during which Chandler Young had said, "Why not *vivisect* one of them—that's what you bastards *really* want to do!"). Nothing had been decided. NASA was still wrestling with the problem of contamination, although some folks

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in the media "joked" that a few alien germs couldn't possibly screw up Earth any worse than it already was.

For now, though, the crew was authorized only to photograph and observe Hyper behavior. The future use of X-ray and ultra-sound wavered on the horizon, broiling in the heat of the sun they approached so swiftly. Young had already gone on record as refusing to consider any probe of a Hyper that involved anything other than non-coherent visible light. He considered ultra-sound far too risky, afraid the subject might implode or something.

When Gray again looked to the void, the last Hyper had assembled, and their victim was already in the center of the lights, starting to spin up. Gray took a deep hit on his oxygen, and forced himself to watch the ritual through to the end. What did Young see that nobody else did? Why was he so *sure?*

Gray held his breath. Nothing about the Killing had changed, except that the pace had picked up. It was over before he was ready, and a few seconds later the cool mist blew past, wetting the inner surface of the chamber.

Gray turned and crouched in the mouth of the S-curve, waiting for the slime on the back of his neck to dry. The sick, metallic odor made his eyes water. He lifted his safety glasses and rubbed at his eyes with the back of his glove. Damn these guys.

The Hyper who'd bustled past him now emerged from around the corner and pushed by him again, headed back inside. It stopped, seemed to whirl around to look at him, though of course there were no obvious eyes on its quivering body. Maybe *that* was the problem. Maybe the bastards were just blind: crazy little Mr. Magoo's bumbling around all day, getting into trouble.

Except they never bumbled, and—aside for the ritual Killing—they never got into trouble.

Gray stood his ground, shining his flashlight at the alien. (Chandler Young's whining voice rose up in his head: "Don't shine lights at them! You don't know how *sensitive* they are!") But Gray kept the light where it was, thinking: Chandler Young doesn't know how sensitive *I* am.

Stand in the dark with this creepy son of a bitch? Not happening.

"How you doing?" Gray asked.

The Hyper's body pulsed.

"How's that again?"

When they first saw the Hypers, Young suggested they try some kind of IQ test on them: something simple, like symbol recognition. Young started work on a kind of dolphin typewriter thing he'd seen at a Disney in Buenos Aires. But the creatures' lack of interest put the project on a back burner, and the prototype machine was never finished. Ultimately, NASA made other demands on their limited time inside Hyperion. For a lot of reasons, the cameras came first.

And besides, how could they test the IQ of subjects that refused to cooperate?

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Gray said, "Hey, I'm talkin' to *you,* sport." When he leaned forward, he could hear a rhythmic pounding sound coming from the alien. His smile dropped; he edged closer. The Hyper twitched. "Hey, man," said Gray, "I won't hurt you." The Hyper wobbled, and Gray distinctly heard . . . saxophones.

Saxophones?

Something long and dark oozed from the Hyper's body. "What the hell's *this?"* It was a loop of wire, skinny and black. He reached out and pulled gently on the wire; the creature quivered. Something dark and round burst from its skin, bringing with it the sound of bass and drums. For a long moment Gray stared at the hideous black object, watching as a bubble of slime vibrated in time with the music. I'm crazy, he thought. I'm out of my freakin' head. A muffled voice sang, "Huh! Yeah! *Huh!* All *right!"*

Then Gray's mind spun around, locking into place, and he at once recognized the slimy black object: a headset minispeaker. The Hyper squealed and hissed in time with the music. Somehow it had stolen Captain Jones's disc player and absorbed it into its fat, wobbly body.

Gray let the wire go. "You keep it, pal. I don't think he'd want it back now."

The Hyper bounced off the tunnel wall and twirled on puffs of air. It bounced again, then settled, blocking the way. It looked like a beat-up weather balloon. Gray took a hit of oxygen, then pulled the dripping glove off his left hand with his teeth. He again reached out, this time lightly stroking the alien's wet skin. It hummed back at him, tickling his palm. He grinned, still clenching the glove in his teeth. A bitter taste of wall slime seeped past his lips, and he spat out the glove. "Nothing personal."

He kept stroking the alien's skin, wondering if anybody had thought to do this before. Very slowly a bulge swelled where he was touching, and the first thing he thought was that a welt was forming. (Young's petulant voice: "What are you *doing* to him!") Then a stubby "hand" pushed out from the body, pressing its palm to his.

"Jesus!"

He almost pulled back. The skin felt cool at first, then it warmed, tingling with faint electricity. Oh, shit. "Don't do *that,* man. You make me nervous." Gray tried to pull his hand back, but the alien drifted toward him, not breaking contact. They were glued together.

"Oh, no . . ." Now Gray wished he had his glove on. He stopped moving, and the alien waited, approaching no closer. They stood there, hand in "hand." For a long moment nothing happened. "All right. Let's try something else."

He squeezed the Hyper's "hand," and it felt . . . sweet . . . sweet as chocolate ice cream. He blinked, and his mouth filled with saliva. His head kept buzzing. He thought he could hear . . . or feel . . . the music coming out of the headphones. He blinked again: Fireflies filled the tunnel. He stopped breathing. The corridor grew dim, as though the

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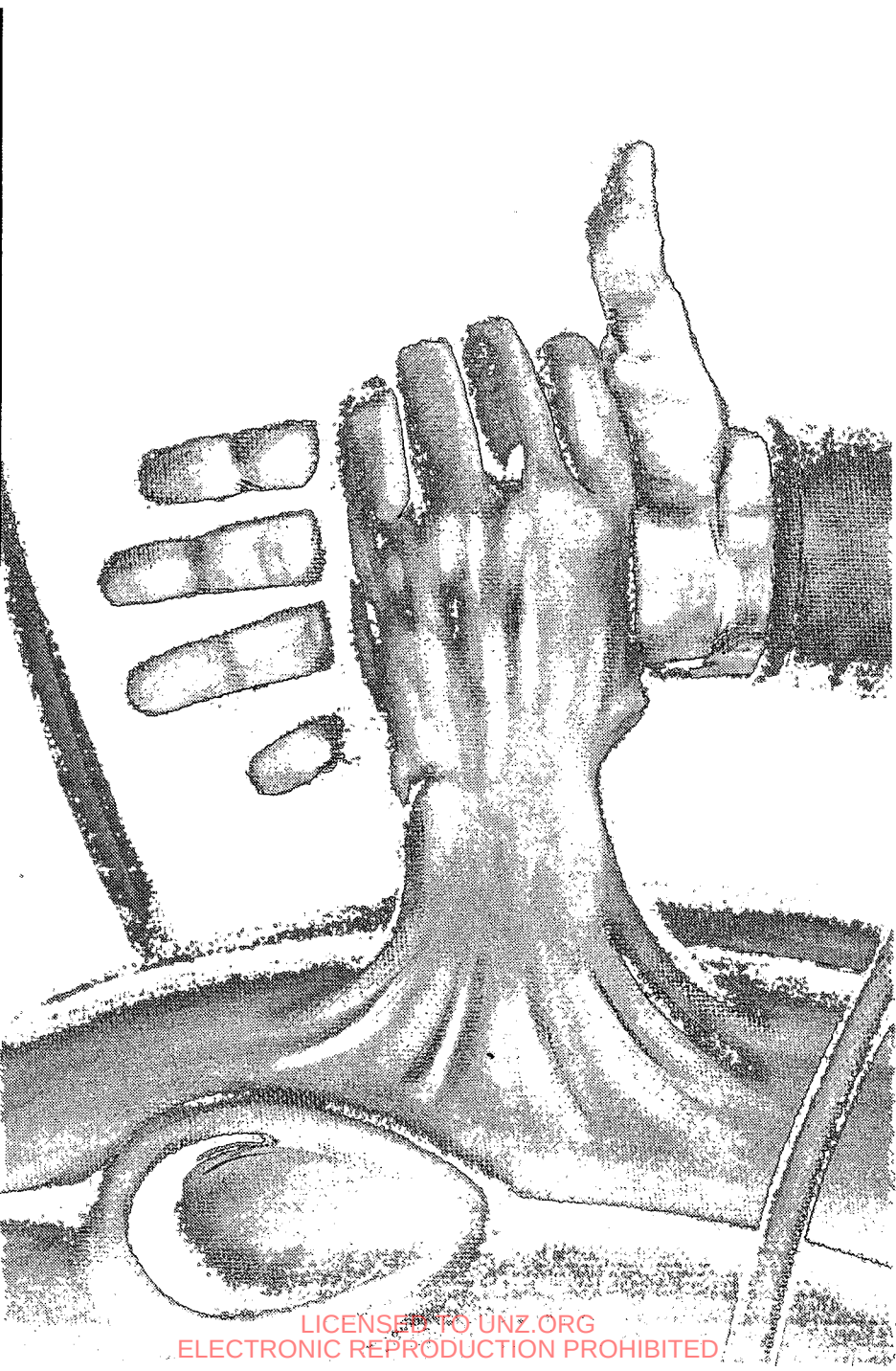

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sensitivity of his eyes was dialing back. God Almighty. The alien was playing his nervous system like a musical instrument.

He took a breath. "Wait a minute," he said, but his voice made no sound. His hand clenched involuntarily. No. Don't do that. Not that.

The Hyper's flesh swelled, flowing out and around his hand, encasing it. Again he pulled back, gently at first, then harder and harder. "Let go," he tried to say. His hand seemed sunk in concrete that was rapidly setting up. Splotchy purple lights vibrated around his head, hissing at him. His cheeks grew hot. His groin tingled, genitals stirring. Oh, brother ... .

From up the tunnel another Hyper squealed. At once, the pressure was released, and the alien flesh flowed back away from his hand. With a wet crackling sound, they came loose, their "hands" separating.

Instantly, the tunnel brightened again, his flashlight—still gripped hard in his right hand—shining on the mottled pink alien. He stared as the mimicked hand melted back into the body, counting quickly: five fingers. The Hyper whistled at him, three ascending, rather sour notes, then it took off, flanks rippling, to join its ugly pal. Up against a wet tunnel wall, the two of them loitered. The wall quivered, and a hole opened. The Hypers squeezed inside, and the hole irised shut behind them.

30

Gray slapped the airmask over his face and took a deep breath. Contact! Holy Christ, that was *contact!* Wasn't it? *Wasn't* it? His heart was pounding. Man, oh *man*. He held his left hand in front of the light, found it reddened and a little bit numb. He shook it off, crouched, and grabbed the glove off the spin-gee floor of the S-curve, where it had finally settled. He put it back on. It was sticky inside, but felt comfortable.

Strange.

He stayed down there, crouched near the slimy floor, his boots sticking to it. He looked around, and smiled at the glistening tunnel walls. All his little pains and itches went away, and for one happy moment he felt at home in Hyperion.

Home . . . home in Hyperion . . .

The feeling passed like a dizzy spell, leaving him disoriented.

"Oh, no! Not *here!* Not *me!*"

He straightened up, the back of his neck itching, where the guts of the sacrificial Hyper had dried to a scummy powder. He felt lousy, all his twitchy, achey feelings coming back. His left hand buzzed, his right one burning across the knuckles. Welcome back to reality.

He didn't know what had just happened, but he knew it was important. All right, maybe it wasn't contact, not in the textbook meaning of the word. But it was *some*thing. Something important.

It meant he'd have to reevaluate the whole situation. They *all* would.

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How much of this ritual business had NASA actually seen? What exactly was Liang telling them?

It occurred to him that the Colonel wouldn't say anything that might compromise the original intent of the mission planners. She'd tell NASA what she thought they wanted to hear. Business As Usual. Chandler was right: Too much money had been spent to tell the truth now.

But he had to try.

Gray keyed his radio, calling the Old Lady. "I think Young should get a chance to tell his side of this to NASA."

"No way."

"He's the expert on site."

"He's a murderer, Colonel. He's not coming on my ship until we're ready to go. Are you finished stringing video cables?"

He ignored her. "I want to bring Young on board to use the big antenna."

"Not happening."

"It's only fair."

"Not on my ship. I mean it!"

"I want a link, then."

"No."

"He should tell his own story."

"No."

"It's only fair."

"Gray, can you hear me? Is my transmission breaking up or what? I said, *no*. Now get to work. I don't want to hear from you until the work is done."

No excuses, Gray. No excuses.

He listened to the faint hiss of the dead channel, wondering if he should tell her about his alien contact. The problem was, he was having trouble remembering just why he was so excited. There'd been no words exchanged. Just a sort of electric handshake. He imagined Liang laughing at him: Shaking hands ain't nothing, Gray. Come back when you've been to bed with one of them.

Ha, ha.

Well, for all he knew, he *had* been to bed with the guy.

Gray resisted an impulse to rub his crotch, to erase the memory of that small, forbidden tickle of excitement. When he told the story of this encounter, if he ever did, that was something he'd keep to himself.

He didn't need the jokes.

Then he thought of somebody who wouldn't laugh.

31

"What do you want?" asked Chandler Young.

Gray reached into the cabinet and grabbed the man by his T-shirt. "Come with me!"

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"Where?"

"I'm bringing you onto the ship. You're going to radio NASA. Do you know what to say?"

"It's pointless."

"They have to be told, and *I* can't do it. I can't even think straight."

"Obviously."

"Look, if they're killing themselves because of us, we have to do something about it." Gray dragged Young into the slatted sunlight. "Do you know what you're going to say?"

"It's pointless, man. Liang already told me she wouldn't let me talk to NASA."

"She's not going to know about it."

Chandler Young laughed. "You really *are* nuts."

"Whatever. I can't just let it happen, not anymore."

"Why?"

Gray hesitated. "I touched one of them. I mean, one of them . . . touched me."

"You—"

"Don't ask me what happened."

"But how did—"

"I'll tell you later. Come on. I'm taking you over."

Young dug in his heels, dragging his meager weight. "Wait a minute. Suppose I talk to NASA and they say forget it? Suppose they won't listen to me?"

"*Make* 'em listen. Make 'em believe you."

"Why can't *you* tell them?"

"You're the professional."

"What if I'm wrong?"

Gray stopped dragging the man. "Is *that* what you've been doing in there? Chickening out?"

"MacPhail was right. We might never know the truth."

"But didn't you say act on the assumption?"

"I don't know . . ."

"You distinctly said—"

"I don't know!"

Gray shook Young back and forth. "You miserable shit. I ought to tear your fuckin' head off. Now *you're* betraying them, the poor, helpless—"

"Stop it!"

"If you don't help me now, it'll all be *your* fault. All the sacrifices, all the killings, going on and on. It'll be right there on TV. We'll watch it together, Young, month after month, until the signals fade and the picture fills with static. And when the images die, when there's nothing left to see, it'll *still* be going on. You *know* that's true: killing and killing and killing until there's no one left."

Chandler twisted around, his eyes rimmed with red. "Just shut up!"

"Listen to me. They've stepped up the schedule, Young. It's every half hour now."

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"Oh, Christ." Chandler stopped struggling. "I have to see them. Take me to the core."

"No. I want you to talk to NASA first. You—"

"I have to see!"

"No!"

Without warning, Young jammed an elbow into Gray's side, then smashed his throat with a karate chop. Gray's fingers opened, the words "What the hell are you doing?" jammed up in his aching throat, unspoken. Young snatched the oxygen bottle from Gray's belt and pushed off. In a second he was through the makeshift airlock and out of the sundeck chamber.

Gray coughed and wheezed, tears in his eyes. Son of a bitch! He keyed his radio and heard Captain Jones say, "Hello, who is this?" He turned it off. What could he say? He'd let Young get loose; he was the one who'd have to get the guy back. Alone.

32

Just outside the sundeck, he saw faint footprints pressed into the spin-down side of the fleshy tunnel. Even as he watched, the prints filled in and disappeared, erasing the evidence. But that didn't matter now. Young hadn't lied: He was headed inward, toward the central chamber. Gray took off after him.

The tunnels were crowded with spiders and fat Hypers. The pace of life aboard this rock was quickening. As he ran, Gray checked his watch, making a quick calculation. Another sacrifice due, if they were keeping to their new, accelerated schedule.

He pushed and kicked and wormed his way around the spiral line of Highway One. Since the blue power cables had by now disappeared, he navigated by memory, following the familiar scars and discolorations of the tunnel. Now and then he caught bright red glimpses of the bundled video cables, confirming his route.

He passed the entrance to the Green Room and glanced inside. Deserted. He twisted through the S-curve, bouncing off the walls. From the exit tunnel he could see the floodlit void, swirling with gnats and flying spiders. In the center, floating in the middle of the lights, a circle of Hypers was forming.

Christ!

He thought of going back to the Green Room and looking for a stray oxygen bottle, but couldn't take the time. He knew there were bottles at the center, so he grabbed a line crawler from the recharging rack and jumped from the lip of the tunnel. The motor whined and throbbed, sucking the yellow line into its wear-polished throat as fast as it could, but taking forever just the same.

"Come on! Come *on!*"

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His gloves clenched the padded D-rings, his left hand still feeling tingly and wet from his alien handshake. Something else to worry about.

The closer he got, the faster the circle of aliens rotated. The chosen Hyper was already in the center, already starting to spin up amidst the lights and the stinging whips and the rhythmic whistles.

"Come on! Come on!"

He had the trigger squeezed flat to the ring; the line crawler sang a high note, its motor getting hot. But it just wasn't going to be enough.

He was almost to the gridwork of lights and video gear when he spotted Chandler Young climbing over a switcher console. "Hey," yelled Gray. "Don't move!"

Young didn't look back, didn't seem to hear him. By this time Gray was gasping for breath, and he ignored Young to look for the emergency air bottle that was supposed to be hooked to the video mixing station. Found it, fat and red. He hoped it was full.

As he got close to the end of the line, the crawler's electric motor slowed automatically, and he knew the last of the way would be agonizingly slow.

He stood it as long as he could, then pushed off, jumping toward the switcher console.

In the distance, the Hyper circle was reaching a climax. Chandler Young looked back, glared at Gray, and leaped toward a bank of smoking floodlights. Gray tried to yell, but his lungs were empty. He concentrated on the red oxygen bottle, maddened by his slow, helpless, freefall trajectory.

"I know what I'm doing!" yelled Young, his voice loud and low and full of Gray's oxygen. "Stay back!"

Stay back? Gray's lips twitched into a half smile. Talk to Newton, pal. Talk to Coriolis. His path was set and could not be altered. Young knew that.

Gray's lungs ached, and his diaphragm convulsed in the familiar spasm of his dreams. He felt as if he were drowning.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . .)

Young yelled, loudly and without words. Gray saw him move, glimpsed out of the corner of his blurring eyes. He stared straight ahead and concentrated on the squat red bottle. Ten feet . . . five feet . . . *three* feet. He stretched his fingers . . . ("Come on, you *bitch!*") . . . and grabbed the bottle. For a moment it slipped around in his slimy gloves, and he couldn't get his hand to close around the mask . . . ("Damn it, damn it!") . . . then he had it, and the mask was over his mouth and nose, the cool oxygen filling his lungs.

He took several deep breaths, then held one and looked around, his vision clearing. He blinked. The members of the Hyper circle continued to spin, cilia whipping, the whistles coming faster and faster . . . but something was wrong out there. "Oh, no . . ."

Chandler Young was struggling with the guy in the middle, his arms sunk deep into the gooey alien flesh, trying to break up the ritual.

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"Young! Get the hell out of there!"

"I'm all right!"

"Goddamn it! Don't mess with it! You can't stop them by—"

Young yelled, pushing hard, and the two of them—man and alien—rocketed out of the circle in opposite directions.

Young spun around, flailing with his hands, until he snagged a member of the circle. "Shit!" At the same time, the chosen alien sailed off into the dark on puffs of air. Happy or disappointed, who could tell?

Young rode the alien as it rotated, plastered flat against it, screwing up its balance and making it wobble.

"Jesus *Christ,* Young!"

"I'm all right."

"Get *off* of him!" Gray laughed. "You're gonna get yourself arrested or something."

Young laughed, getting to his knees. "He's sticky."

"You're lucky."

"God, I'm getting . . . dizzy."

"You deserve it."

Chandler Young struggled with the alien for a moment. "Oh, no . . ." He seemed to be trying to get a grip. "Something's happening . . . I'm slipping . . ."

"Jump clear!"

Chandler went around and around, looking sick, clawing at the alien flesh. A dim flicker of light beneath him: He yelled in pain, then was flung free, right out across the ring of Hypers.

"Young!"

The Hyper must have zapped him.

"Help . . ." he said, his voice small and muffled by effort. He bounced off the alien across the circle, and a second later he was centered in the killing zone.

"Young!"

The Hypers didn't seem to notice the difference, and continued to whip their strong, transparent tentacles. Young jerked about crazily for several seconds, then seemed to give up.

His oxygen bottle went flying; the bottle and mask, joined as they were by the plastic tube, quivered to and fro, dancing a buoyant little jig. Young began to spin, his face a blur.

Gray was too far away. "Chandler!"

The gleaming disks of stiffened filament formed—faster, it seemed to Gray, than they ever had before—and touched the man at the neck.

"Christ!"

33

After a few hours, they gave up the search for Chandler Young's head.

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34

Distance to the sun: 6.27 million miles
Velocity: 124.52 miles per second
Time past ETD: 37 minutes

Gray took hold of the lip of the black shuttle's airlock and vaulted through the open hatchway. He didn't know how to close the alien airlock, so the best he could do was press himself into the debris-filled shadows. Colonel Liang lumbered past the opening in her iso-suit, looking straight ahead, headed for the sundeck. She didn't see him.

No doubt she only wanted to know what was going on. The problem was, Gray didn't know what to tell her.

MacPhail dead, now Chandler Young. They'd blown the deadline by thirty-eight minutes, and they were nowhere near ready to get off the rock. The mission was in shambles, and always had been. How do you cop to that? It was not the sort of information Liang was ready to acknowledge. And Gray was the last man on Hyperion willing to deliver it. He waited for several minutes in the dark airlock, his ruined feet burning, wedged into the crannies of its bizarre plumbing. It stank in there, like sour piss. He remembered how Young had looked, crammed into the same hidey hole. He thought: We've changed places.

That meant it was his turn to advocate leaving Hyperion, and failing that, it was now *his* duty to begin sabotaging the mission.

Gray smiled: And I know how to do it, too.

Only he wasn't ready for that. If he really knew where he stood, would he be hiding from the Old Lady?

Yeah, probably . . .

So he huddled in the dim and smelly shuttle, staring at the complicated innards of the airlock. Something occurred to him. All along nobody had thought that the Hypers were the main guys on this rock, the original designers and builders, largely because they couldn't have operated these shuttles. The idea went like this: If the shuttles belonged to Hyperion, then whoever ran the place had to be able to handle them. But the Hypers couldn't handle anything—no hands. Right?

Wrong. Gray's left hand still tingled where it had been touched, where it had been *grasped,* by one of them. They *had* hands when they *wanted* them, hands of every shape and size.

Gray wished he could have thought of that when he tried to get Chandler Young to talk to NASA. It might have given the guy hope of convincing somebody. It might even have saved his life.

35

Gray hippity-hopped along Highway One, headed for the central chamber, shining his heavy black flashlight this way and that, on the look-

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out for Colonel Liang. Hyperion had been quivering and dancing for the last few hours, ever since Young's death. Spiders ran frantically through the tunnels; the buzzing gnats swirled and swarmed.

The place was awash now with human trash, as if the pack-rat spiders had decided to bring it all back. Old tunnel signs were stuck to the slime, pointing the wrong way to safety. Gurgling tubes swelled, nearly blocking some passages, and there were sounds—deep, garbled sounds —vibrating through the walls.

Me and Hyperion, he thought. We're both going crazy.

A fat green spider hopped up his sleeve and bit his arm. He yelled and ripped it loose, banging it against the tunnel wall. The spider turned, red eyes wiggling, and hissed at him.

"Fuck you, too," Gray said. "I don't need this shit."

Turning a corner, he ran smack into one of the Hypers. It was struggling with a length of signal cable that had got wrapped around itself. Gray winced when he saw the way the thin black cable cut into the creature's body. "Stop squirming!" he said. "You're just making it worse!"

He grabbed hold of the free end of the cable, but the Hyper twisted away, winding it tighter. "Turn the other way, you idiot!"

The Hyper jerked the cable free, ripping it through Gray's fisted glove. "Ow!" He examined his stinging palm. Stiff wires from the braided coaxial shield had torn a path through the rotting leather. Beneath the glove, his right hand was reddened, lined with bright blood. *Damn* it! First the knuckles, now the palm, ripped to shit. The way things were going, they were going to have to chop the damned thing off.

He looked up. The Hyper spun, bounced off the tunnel floor, and twisted away. "Come *back* here!"

Gray took off after him. "Slow down! I'm trying to *help* you!" If he didn't catch the guy and somehow get the cable unwound, that Hyper would cut himself in two.

He lunged, but the alien spun again, and the spiky free end of the cable whacked Gray's face, ripping loose his safety glasses. "Damn it!" Cut above the brow, he slowed to wipe the blood out of his eyes. "Now I'm getting mad."

The Hyper bounded ahead, squealing. Gray tossed his busted glasses aside and pushed off after him. A swarm of spiders darted past, tangling in his hair.

He swatted at them, swearing, and fell behind. Up ahead, the Hyper was squeezing itself through a hole in the tunnel wall. Gray yelled, throwing off spiders, and drived for the opening.

Too late.

"You idiot!"

He plunged his left arm into the closing hole, snagging a loop of the cable. His gloved fingers probed the Hyper's pliant flesh, digging for a better grip on the cable. The Hyper squealed and hissed. "Oh, Christ," Gray muttered. "I'm sorry." He knew he was just making it worse. The creature quivered and struggled, dragging Gray forward, smack against

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the wall. He turned his head, his left cheek making wet sounds in the slime. The hole in the tunnel closed up around his arm. "Please come back here! I can *help* you!"

The wall's pressure on his upper arm grew strong, and now the quivering wire was cutting into his fingers. He yelled in frustration, then let go, pulling his hand back through the wall. He had to make a fist to keep hold of his slimy glove.

He stood there a moment, rubbing his hand, and glared at the quickly healing wound in the wall. Gnats flitted about his face, trying to get into his eyes and ears.

Oh, for crying out loud. You couldn't help these people to save your life; even when you *tried*, it only hurt them more.

Light flickered in the tunnel; someone coming his way. Oh, no! Not Liang, not now!

He turned, slapping the gnats away, and looked up the tunnel toward freedom. The way was blocked by a purple mist. "Now what. . . ?" A probe of violet light zapped out, burning his chin.

"The hell's *that?!*" asked Judy Taves-Roth, coming up behind him.

When he saw who it was, he relaxed. "I don't know. Some kind of organic laser?"

"I don't—*damn* it!" She waved at a whining cloud of gnats, brushing them out of her hair. Miss Piggy had deserted her. *"Ow!* All of a sudden, the little bastards *bite!"*

"You get the feeling that we're not wanted here any more? I think Hyperion is rejecting us."

"Like there's an immune system or something? Why didn't they start this before?"

He shook his head, and smashed something crawling up the inside of his pantleg. "Who knows? This place is going nuts."

A swarm of fat spiders boiled out of the purple mist, their jaws clicking madly. Gray swung his long flashlight, batting half a dozen of them back down the tunnel.

He saw his safety glasses on the floor, and picked them up. The strap was busted, sliced through; he tied a knot and tried the glasses on. They were too tight now, even with the adjustment at max, but he was willing to get used to that. The idea of things flying into his eyes made him too jumpy.

He took a breath of oxygen, then offered the mask to Judy. She waved it off, saying, "Where were you headed?"

He thought: Anywhere Liang is not. He said: "To the void, I guess." Knowing the Colonel, it was the safest place.

"I'll come with you."

"Great."

He smiled at her, testing. Did she really want his company? Or would anybody do?

She smiled back, sort of.

Well, now . . .

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They passed the entrance to the Green Room, going directly to the S-curve. Across the void, lights floated at the center of the central chamber. Gray checked his countdown watch. "They've missed another one." Five more ritual sacrifices had been made since Young's death, coming every ten minutes. Then, abruptly, the killings had stopped. There'd been no assembly in nearly three hours.

Another blast of purple light zapped past, dying out in the distance. "Wait a minute," he said. Judy followed him to the Green Room and watched him kill the lights at the breaker box. Back to the opening: "Look," he said.

Faint beams of violet light flickered back and forth across the chamber. The longer he watched, his eyes adjusting, the more there were.

Judy whispered, "You should report this to Liang."

"Yeah, probably . . ."

He hesitated.

"So go ahead," Judy said, louder. "Report it."

"Don't rush me."

"What's the matter? You guys aren't talking?"

Before he could answer, the walls convulsed for several seconds. "What was that?" asked Judy.

"I don't know. Felt like the whole damn place shifted directions." Gray looked around. Everything was back to normal.

"Go on," Judy said. "Now you have *two* things to report."

"All right, all right." He pulled out his communicator, but the radio was full of shrieking static. "Listen," he said, turning up the volume for Judy. "Hyperion has discovered the joys of electromagnetic radiation." The radio whistled and hissed and groaned.

He shut it off, then reached out to pry loose a spider that was gnawing its way through the back of Judy's black jumpsuit. "Something's happening," he said. "I think we'd better get back to the, uh . . . wait a minute. . . ."

He turned his flashlight on the inside wall of the central chamber. Long yellow spikes wiggled and stretched, waving their black nobs in the air. Most of the little round tips had split open, revealing tufts of fine red hairs. There were millions of them, coating the inside of the chamber as far as his light would reach. "It's blooming! This crazy place is *blooming!*"

He turned toward Judy, but she was staring past him. "Alex . . ."

He looked. Oh, Christ, it was Colonel Liang, balanced on the hump of the S-curve, blocking the way back inside. Her isolation suit was sopping with stringy yellow mucus. Behind her faceplate, she looked closed off, remote, zombie-like.

"Well, you got me here," she said, staring past him into the dark void. "I hope you're pleased."

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"You're blaming this on *me?*" asked Gray. "It was Chandler Young!"

"You—" Liang stopped, as a troop of spiders marched over her shoulder and down the front of her suit. She held her arms at her sides, just enduring it, eyes glazed over. When they were gone, she said, "Turn the lights on out there. I want to see."

"Yes, ma'am."

He went alone to the Green Room and reset the breakers. When he got back, Liang was just floating in the entranceway, her arms tangled in safety line.

"My God. . . ," she whispered, her amplified voice probably louder than she realized. In the void, the rays swooped and fluttered, gliding through the shifting beams of automatic spotlights.

Gray said, "Something weird's been happening, ever since—"

Hyperion twitched again, the tunnel walls shimmering like aspic.

"There it is again!" Judy said.

"Just a correction in orientation," said Liang, still looking out into the void. "It keeps the short axis aimed at the sun."

Gray said, "Oh." As if that made any difference. "Uh, Colonel . . . what I'm trying to *say* is—"

"Good news, guys," said Liang, turning from the opening. "We're leaving."

He was stunned. "Really?"

"What do you expect? We've run out of time."

He grinned at Judy, relieved. "Well, exactly . . ."

Liang said, "Clean this crap out of here and we're gone."

Gray blew out a deep, oxygen-poor breath, his head vibrating. He was afraid to ask, but apparently NASA had decided in Young's favor. Maybe it was the way he'd given his life, backing up his speculation with the ultimate sacrifice. Sure, he hadn't *meant* to do it, but he'd be pleased with the result.

Gray nodded at the center of the void.

"Give me Curtis Jones, and we'll have those cameras out of there in three hours. After that—"

"Leave the cameras," said Liang.

"What?"

"I'm talking about all *this* junk." She pointed at the walls of S-curve, littered with the floating trash of human occupation. "I want these tunnels policed up."

"But the cameras . . ." He looked out into the void. Several Hypers milled about in the lights. Was the schedule resuming? "I thought NASA had decided . . ."

"For God's sake, Gray," said Liang. "Those cameras are what we *came* for. Those cameras are what this mission is all about. Of *course* we're leaving the cameras. What the hell's the *matter* with you? Make final checks on 'em, and the cables, and the switching control, and the antenna system." She gestured back down Highway One. "Curtis Jones is finish-

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ing the borehole now. He'll be ready for you in an hour. We're leaving in two. So get busy."

Gray pointed into the void. "But the Killings—"

"There's no proof the Killings have anything to do with us," Liang said. "And beside, if we took the cameras out, we'd never know, one way or the other."

"We wouldn't anyway. If it's us, it could be the cameras, too."

"Yeah," said Liang. "One of life's little mysteries." She brushed past him. "Get to work."

"No," said Gray.

He looked at Judy. She frowned, moving backward. Bugging out. She had never supported Chandler Young and his theories. The hell with her.

He turned to confront the Old Lady, but Liang was disappearing up the tunnel. Sealed off in her iso-suit, she had apparently not heard his little mutiny.

Son of a bitch.

He bounced through the S-curve, catching sight of her in the main tunnel of Highway One. He watched her go, and the shout he had ready in his throat stayed there, silently turning to rust. He returned to Judy. "She didn't hear me."

"You're lucky."

"But *you* heard me."

Judy stared at him for a moment, then looked away. "You better think about what you're doing."

He glanced out into the central void. In the lights, more Hypers bobbed about, perhaps half a dozen. "I'd have to kill her, wouldn't I?"

"For God's sake, Alex!"

"What?"

"You shouldn't be talking like that. Hyperion's so wired up, anybody could be listening."

"I'm just saying: I'd have to kill her. She'd never agree to hauling all this stuff out of here. To her it's simple: The cameras *are* the mission."

"Well, they *are,* aren't they?"

"I guess."

This rock offered a free ride to another solar system. They had to take it.

"I'm surprised they haven't called for volunteers," Gray said. "Guys to ride Hyperion all the way down."

All the way down.

(Deeper . . . deeper . . .)

He reached for his oxygen bottle.

Judy said, "They're probably still talking about that, now that it's pretty clear we could survive in here indefinitely. If only the Hypers were edible. . . ."

Gray laughed, half sick. "Yeah, that would be the perfect solution: Stay aboard and eat the natives. Hey, we got the bastards on *tape.* What

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the hell else do we want? Why should we treat these guys any different than we do the animals back on planet Earth? Tell you what, babe: Let's stay. Let's ride it down."

"Ha."

"No, no, really. We could devour this place, we could gobble it down to the bare walls. Me and you . . . and our little tunnel rats to come. You're fertile, aren't you? I mean, after the drugs wear off?"

"You're really funny."

"The perfect solution. We could maintain the cameras to the end, keep the high-gain antenna pointed right at Earth and everything. And we could train the kids to keep up the tradition. I mean, it's going to take a while to get to Alpha Centauri."

"Ten thousand years, more or less."

"Who cares, as long as we're happy?"

"You're nuts."

One of the fat Hypers popped up at the entrance to the void. "There's one now," he said. "Let's try and eat him."

"Stop it, Alex."

"Come on, babe: It's what we do best! It's what we were *made* for!"

The Hyper came closer to them and stopped. Gray stared at it. "What do *you* want? An apology?"

"What's he doing?" Judy whispered.

A lump was forming on the top of its body. It swelled upward, smooth and ovoid, nearly a foot tall, slime pouring off its sides.

"Dios!" Gray muttered. "*Now* what?"

The lump rotated to show a bumpy side. Fat melted away, revealing deep eye sockets and a nose.

"Oh, God . . ." said Judy.

The head wobbled, then broke loose, tumbling slowly down the sticky flank of the creature, handed down, it seemed, by millions of tiny cilia. The head came to rest on the spongy tunnel floor, staring at them.

"It's Chandler Young," said Gray. "They found his head."

"And brought it back."

"I *told* you. They know what they're doing! They know what's going on! They *know*—"

"Colonel Gray!"

He turned, breathless. It was Liang again.

37

"You came back. . . ." Gray felt a watery heat in his body, as if he'd been caught stealing. She'd sent him to work, and he hadn't begun. (No excuses, Gray.)

"Yeah, I came back," she said, looking at Young's glistening head. "I wanted out. I wanted—very badly—to be *out* of here. But it doesn't matter now."

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"I guess not," he said, noticing the frothy rent in her isolation suit. She'd been breached, the fabric ripped by the jaws of some spider or other. The door to her little airlock office hideaway would be open, from now on. Without humor he said, "Welcome to Hyperion."

"Yeah, right."

She looked disgusted . . . and scared. Well, she had company. Now they'd all be in quarantine together at the South Pole. Maybe it was bound to happen, but Gray couldn't help thinking that if it hadn't been for Chandler Young, they'd all be on their way home by now.

Liang said, "Where'd you find the head?"

Gray nodded at the Hyper. "He brought it over."

Liang watched the alien bounce and puff its way back out into the void. "Well, he did his duty."

Gray didn't know if she was praising the alien for its honesty in the lost-and-found department, or eulogizing Chandler Young. He wondered if getting her suit breached would change her mind about anything. Probably not. She said, "Don't let me hold you up."

"Excuse me?"

She frowned, and took a hit of oxygen from the tube by her mouth. It was obvious he knew what she meant; she seemed pissed that he was putting her through all this game-playing. "Your work, Colonel. Don't you have some *work* to do? Despite your reservations?"

She *knows,* he thought. She heard me a few minutes ago, when I refused her order. Talk about game-playing.

He hesitated. Now what?

Sure, he could refuse all over again, really make himself understood this time. Take a stand on moral principles. Make some damned speech, full of Dramatic Gestures: hand on his heart, tears in his eyes, a throb in his voice, a fungus in his brain. Oh, yeah. But it wouldn't be *enough.* He could say whatever he wanted; he could protest all he liked, but if it was going to *mean* anything, he'd have to kill her. See, it wouldn't be enough to refuse to "check" the cameras. The cameras were fine. In order to make his point, he'd have to start yanking the cameras out of there. And if he did that, she'd have to stop him, try to arrest him or something. Naturally, he'd have to resist. In the end, he'd have to kill her. Hell, he'd have to kill them *all*—or recruit them into his murderous mutiny.

But if he killed them all, who'd help him drag all this equipment out of there? Who'd help him repair the borehole Curtis Jones was still drilling through the hangar wall? Who'd help him clean all this junk out of Hyperion?

Nobody.

He was already screwed.

"Oh, man . . ." he said. "It's too late, isn't it? If Chandler's right or Chandler's wrong—it makes no difference. The trigger's pulled, the button's been pushed, the circuit's been activated. We're right in the middle of an explosion here, and there's not a damned thing I can do about it."

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"I guess you could look at it that way." Liang turned to Judy. "Where do you stand on this thing?"

Judy shrugged. "I just want to get home. A year in quarantine . . . five years . . . I don't care. I'll read Dickens. I'll watch old Eddie Murphy tapes. I'll eat a million snow cones, if I have to. I don't *care*. I just want to get home."

Liang looked at Gray. "No help there, eh, Colonel?"

Gray laughed. "I don't need any help."

"Is that right?"

"I already *said* it was too late."

"It is."

"The bullet is in the air."

"It's just possible," Liang said, "that Chandler Young was wrong. There may *be* no bullet."

Gray shrugged. "Maybe not. We'll never know."

"Cheer up," said Liang. "You'll get over it."

Gray smiled, feeling sick, close to tears, and hating his weakness. "Yep." He looked at Judy, who met his eyes, but briefly. "See," he said, "we're built for *that*, too."

"So," Liang said. "We got work to do. We're going home."

"Yep." He turned to face the void. More Hypers capered in the light, but still no quorum for a Killing. He thought: What a piece of shit I am.

38

Gray reached for the yellow transit line, holding on with his slimy left glove. The line crawler was right there, in easy reach. He didn't have to look: Liang was watching him to see what he'd do.

No excuses, Gray. . . .

A manta ray swooped down, flicked the line with one massive blue wing, and flew off into the darkness. The yellow rope quivered in his hand, alive with messages. An ultrasonic buzz warmed the back of his head; the rays were filling the dark with their cryptic code.

He thought: Oh, I want to go home, too. I want to read Dickens with Judy, and watch old movies, and stare up into the hole in the ozone layer, and laugh at what's left of the world. I want to go home and eat snow cones drenched in sweet lime syrup. I want to breathe that cold clean air and blow the white steam out and not have to worry that some creature is being poisoned simply because I choose to go on living. I want to go home and not be *responsible* anymore to anybody. I'm not a dreamer, like Young. I'm not a poet. I'm not anything. So why can't I just let Hyperion fall?

The transit line vibrated against his fist, as somewhere out there in the dark something brushed along its length. Messages, messages from the void. It was his left hand, the one the Hyper had touched. His head buzzed again.

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Messages . . . incomprehensibly coded messages . . .

Gray yelled: "What do you want from me!"

"Just do your job," Liang said, right behind him. "You're one of us." She'd popped the faceplace on her useless iso-suit. Her voice was warm and personal. "I mean it."

Gray laughed, turning back to face the void. "Yeah, I'm sure you do."

"Just do your job."

"Yeah."

My job, my job. There is no *job,* not anymore; this is just a goddamn loyalty test.

"I'm gonna count, Alex. When I get to five, you better be on that line and headed out there. You understand me?"

"Yes."

In the center, the Hypers were nosing about the lights, as if they'd just discovered a great new tanning parlor and were eager to try it out. A squadron of gnats and spiders flashed in the spotlight at the entrance, flying past them.

Liang started counting, her voice firm, the cadence absurdly slow. Gray wanted to laugh, but his insides went all watery again. The sense that he was making some momentous decision fluttered in his head for an instant and flew away.

Oh, man, my brain is rotting out. How does she expect me to make up my mind when I can't even *find* the damned thing?

Liang said, "Three."

"Go on, Alex," said Judy. "Don't be an idiot."

"Ha."

"I'm not kidding!"

"I know it."

"Four," said Liang.

"Four," acknowledged Gray, barely conscious. His mind was a wind tunnel of nonsense. Out in the center of the void, the Hypers bumped against the big lamps, again and again.

Judy said, "Alex!"

He didn't answer.

After a long time, Liang said, "Five."

Gray said, "Yep."

More time went by, Gray staring out into the void. His fist itched with the vibrations that came off the line. Liang was close behind him, nearly touching. He almost expected her to say, "Oh, hell: Six!"

But she didn't.

"Do you know what you're doing?"

Gray laughed. "Haven't got a clue."

"A direct order."

"I know."

"There's nothing you can do for them."

"I know."

She was saying: Let Hyperion fall.

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Why couldn't he do that simple thing?

She moved right up to his ear, speaking low in secretive tones. "What if I told you every one of the discs we recorded so far had been erased? Would that change your mind?"

"Erased?"

"Chandler Young must have done it. You know how crazy he was at the end."

"Erased? *All* of it?"

"Every disc, every tape, every scrap of information. Nobody knows about this yet. I'm afraid to say anything to NASA. My God, Gray: All the data's *gone!* You understand what that means? Twenty billion dollars spent, and it's like we were never here!"

He didn't know what to say. He could see Chandler Young, grinning like a fool, running the machines, erasing the data, cackling with glee: I win! I *win!*

Gray frowned. Wait a minute: *That* sounded familiar.

("I win! I *win!*")

Who said that? It wasn't Young.

Images flickered in his sluggish mind. He saw lights reflecting off glasses. Lights beneath lights, glasses within glasses. A distorted mouth, twisted in pain. Oh, yes.

It was MacPhail, after Young had fatally stabbed him: "I win!" he'd said. *"I win!"*

Why would he say *that?*

"So we *have* to leave the cameras," Liang said. "If we don't—"

Gray said, "You're lying."

Surprised himself, too.

Liang said, "*What* did you say?"

"You're lying, Colonel. It's a lie. Chandler Young would never erase that data."

Those data, he could hear MacPhail saying.

"Why not?"

"Because of what you're trying to tell me right now. Erasing the data would pretty much insure that the cameras would be left inside Hyperion. He'd never take that chance. Maybe on the way *home* he'd have tried to erase the discs . . ."

Liang backed up, away from the intimate closeness. "Damn it, Gray."

In the void, the Hypers were banging against the lights. Gray dropped the quivering transit line and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hey, get away from there!"

After a moment, Liang said, "All right, I took a shot. The data's secure. Hell, most of it has already been coded and transmitted to Earth. We had to, 'cause nobody's really sure we'll make it back ourselves."

"That's what I thought."

"But the cameras are staying."

"I know."

"Are you going to do your job?"

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Let Hyperion fall.

"I guess not."

"Christ."

"I know."

"What am I going to do with you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm screwed."

Screwed.

It was all over.

He smiled. It really *was* all over. He laughed; then laughed even harder at Liang's astonished look. Damn, it felt *good.* No more responsibility, no more trying to get guys to do their jobs. He only had to worry about himself from now on.

Liang said, "You could lose your commission."

"Yep."

So what?

"You could end up doing time in Leavenworth."

Another laugh. "You mean, *after* McMurdo?"

She didn't answer. Thinking about the quarantine, no doubt. She'd probably been hoping to avoid the quarantine at McMurdo, until her iso-suit had suffered a blow-out. Now she was just one of the gang, as far as that went.

Another swarm of gnats and spiders buzzed out of the void, going past. This place was getting awful busy.

Liang said, "Damn it, Gray, you're—what's that?"

A wet popping noise, coming from the center of the void. Flesh sizzled for a moment, then all the lights went out.

Main breaker trip.

39

"That was deliberate!" Gray said. "One of those bastards shorted out a light."

The darkness glimmered, the walls luminescent. Weak flashes of purple laser light criss-crossed the central chamber. In the void, Hyperion . . . groaned.

Gray pulled the flashlight off his belt and turned it on. "Dios!"

A seething cloud of green spiders flew right at him out of the black. He ducked, dragging Liang out of the way. The spiders whooshed through the opening and disappeared up the S-curve, toward Highway One.

Judy was flattened against the tunnel wall, in immediate danger of getting sucked into the alien flesh. "Dios!" she said, half mocking Gray. He laughed.

Liang shoved his protective arm away, as if to say: If you wanna be a proper mutineer, you have to learn to keep your hands to yourself.

Gray laughed at her, too, until he lost his balance and swung out into the void, past the web of Nylon safety lines. Scrabbling at the entrance,

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he grabbed one of the million yellow stalks for support. It held for a moment, checking his outward flight, then broke off, releasing a glittery white powder. Before he could think about what *that* meant, the powder lit up around him like a halo. "What the hell?"

A shaft of brilliant white light sliced him in half, throwing dark shadows through the powder to the flowering wall. From the void came creaks and moans, as though some impossible band had struck up a discordant tune. A breeze rippled the stalks, grew swiftly to a howling wind; the halo of white powder vanished.

Someone was yelling, "Look, *look!*"

It was Liang. She reached out from the webbing and yanked at him, pounded on his back, and turned him around, holding him anchored against the trash-filled wind that blew out of the tunnel.

"Oh, Christ!" said Gray. There went Chandler Young's head, bouncing off Liang's left shoulder; it disappeared into the brightening void, gone forever.

Gray twisted his neck around to see. The vast central chamber had cracked in pie-shaped wedges, throwing lines of sunlight across the middle. For the first time, Gray got a coherent look at the place. Billions of blooming, multicolored stalks lined the interior, forming a mottled pattern of intricate design, just at the boundary of meaning. A flight of manta rays rode the whistling current, their glistening hides glowing in the hazy shafts of light. All the air was streaming out.

"Come *on!*" Liang yelled in his ear, tugging at him.

Pockets of yellowy flesh squirmed all around them. Hyperion stretched, adjusting to the sudden heat. A steady blizzard of sticky junk flowed out through the S-curve, joining in twisted strings that probed the glaring light. Chunks broke loose and disappeared, following the manta rays into the vacuum of space.

Gray grimaced, feeling the tug of drying skin on his face. He touched his safety glasses, glad for their protection.

"Hurry up!" yelled Liang.

"Wait a second! What's that?"

Ten meters away, a fleshy fold had opened in the wall; something glittered there, hung up. Now it came loose, squirting out of its hiding place—a tiny black video camera. "Look!" yelled Gray. The camera jerked to a stop, tethered by a slender cable. He stared at it, his fingers digging into the inner wall. Whose camera was that? For a dizzy moment he considered the camera had been placed there by *another* race, space-faring aliens from some *other* solar system. Had other folks risen to the bait, flying out to study Hyperion as it plummeted through their lives?

But no: It was a standard lightweight mini camera, like half a dozen on board the *Arthur Clarke*. Somebody had hidden it there, a back-up camera, just in case—

MacPhail!

This was his personal mission camera, his hidden source of data, his deep, revenging tool. If Young had succeeded in getting the official cam-

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eras removed, *this* one would have stayed on the job, pumping pirate video to some weak transmitter on the surface of Hyperion.

MacPhail's secret victory.

("I win! I *win!*")

"Let's go, Gray!" yelled Liang, yanking him free. "Right *now*, mister!"

As they clawed their way into the constricting S-curve, right behind Judy, Gray risked one backward glance into the almost blinding light. Son of a bitch! Talk about *blooming:* Hyperion itself was opening to the sun like a flower.

"What about the equipment?" he yelled.

Liang said, "Forget it!"

Good idea.

Cables were already snapping under heavy mass, consoles and lights, cameras and brackets, all blowing out through the widening cracks. In another minute, the interior would be exterior, and the equipment would be dumped into orbit.

"Faster!" yelled Liang, pressing up behind Gray, gouging handholds in the quivering flesh. They were past the entrance to the Green Room now, headed up Highway One. Liang pushed him hard, blocking his view back, her patience gone. "Get *going!*"

More junk from the interior slapped their faces, going past into vacuum. Something wrapped itself around Gray's neck; he pried it loose: page 149/150 of *Rendezvous With Rama.* He looked around; the tunnel was snowing pages from the book. He let page 149 fly with the rest, and it fluttered right through Liang's open faceplate. "Sorry," he yelled.

As if in response, he heard screams in the roaring wind: Hyperion's incoherent protest. It sounded like a mountain of water dropping from a topless height, like pine trees howling in a forest of wind. The air was nauseating, metallic tasting. His nostrils spasmed, trying to shut. The noise rose to a shriek . . . and cut off. His ears ached, and he yelled to clear them, his voice loud in the sudden silence. The tunnels were already closing down behind them, each muscular valve triggering the next, sealing off the outer passages behind them.

As they dug and squirmed their way through the tunnels, slapping aside legions of angry spiders and gnats, Gray couldn't help but laugh. "You know what this means? Young was *wrong!* It wasn't *us!*"

He saw it clearly: The Killing had been a kind of fertilization process, feeding the yellow stalks that wiggled on the walls of the chamber. Waiting for the sunlight, that was all. Perfectly natural.

"It was *sex!*" yelled Gray. "It was just *alien sex!*" He laughed. "It *wasn't* us!"

Not *this* time, anyway.

He lunged forward and grabbed Judy's leg, hauling himself close. The tunnel wall flexed and hissed, but the air pressure was steady now. They were sealed off from the void, where Hyperion spread itself to the waiting sun. "It *wasn't us!*"

"Apparently not."

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"How *could* it be us? We're human beings! We don't *make* mistakes! We're perfect beings!" He laughed. "Perfect beings!"

"You're nuts!" she yelled at him, laughing back.

He turned and grinned at Liang. "We're going home!"

"And not a moment too soon."

Judy screamed. Gray spun around.

Ahead of them, crossing in a tunnel perpendicular to Highway One, was a solemn procession of Hypers. Projecting from each, some on top, others riding jauntily to the side, was a bulbous replica of Chandler Young's head: eyes open, lids blinking, eyeballs rolling; mouth busy in silent lecture, tongue lolling, moustache twitching. As the last one passed, the Young-head turned to them and screamed, exactly as Chandler had screamed when the stiffening knives touched his neck. The Hyper hissed, bouncing along, and disappeared into the tunnel.

"He's a god," said Gray, feeling cold. "We've given them a new god."

40

Light gleamed off the walls of the tunnel ahead, pulsing brighter and brighter. Curtis Jones burst through the fog, airmask strapped over his face, eyes wild behind scratched safety glasses. His once immaculate jumpsuit was covered with a crackling layer of air-dried slime. "You guys!"

"Curtis!" yelled Gray.

Jones careened off the wall, towing an armful of emergency oxygen tanks, which he shoved at them in a heap. "Are you—"

"We're all right," Judy said, reaching for an airmask.

"What the hell's going on, Spike?"

"Everything," said Gray.

"Are we breached?"

"Completely," said Judy. She slapped a mask over her face and passed the others back.

"The mission's scrubbed," Gray said, handing a bottle to Liang. She took it, but he noticed she already had the iso-suit's built-in oxygen tube in her mouth.

Jones said, "Scrubbed?"

"I guess you're right," Liang said, spitting out the tube. Her voice was calm.

Gray pulled the mask from his face, feeling pretty good. "Colonel, I thought you'd be all torn up."

"I don't always go with the flow," she said. "But I make a point of going with the flood."

"What happened?" asked Jones.

Judy said, "All the equipment flew away."

"That's right," Gray said.

But he could see MacPhail's little video camera, twisting on the end

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of the cable. There was no way to retrieve it now, and it was too light to snap its own cable. Surely Hyperion would remain open until after its close approach to the sun—and by then the *Clarke* would be long gone, headed back to Earth on a vast, looping ellipse, conserving its antimatter fuel.

MacPhail's camera . . .

It was a nagging doubt. If they had to, they could yank the power generator out, and haul the thick blue cables back to the ship (or more likely: dump them into space). But that little camera was beyond their reach. . . .

MacPhail's revenge.

("I win. I *win.*")

What if Young had been right after all? Goddamn it, there was still room for doubt: The "blooming" of Hyperion could be seen as an attempt to *rid* itself of the infestation of humans, to cauterize its wounds in the searing glare of the sun. That procession of Young-head Hypers confused him. What if it wasn't over yet? What if every scrap of evidence of human habitation still had to be pulled out of there?

He groaned.

But no, that was impossible. It was already too late. Because it wasn't just the equipment or the candy wrappers or the fingernail clippings: It was *everything*. If Hyperion had given Gray a million disgusting rashes, there was every reason to expect that Gray and his pals had already dosed this place with rashes of their own unknowing design. Each had contaminated the other, and it was too damned late to do anything about it. From that first moment, when they pried their way inside through the airlock, it had been too late. Now it was just a matter of luck to see if anyone survived.

He thought: How can that be right? That *can't* be right.

But he knew it was.

And he saw how the horror of that helpless thought would gnaw at him . . . and how—despite his strongest resolve—the pain of it would sink into the background noise of everyday worry and pain. The horror of that thought would simply disappear, melting away like his name scratched on the fleshy walls of Hyperion: gone, but for the occasional glimpse, as it surfaced in a moment of pointless reflection. And all this would soon become just another unavoidable mistake performed by your average monster of the universe.

Young had been right about *that*. There were always going to be monsters. Young just didn't realize how unavoidable it was.

"Hey, Spike," said Curtis Jones, grinning. "Did you ever think—"

"Stop that!"

"Stop what?"

"Stop calling me 'Spike.' "

Jones looked so crushed Gray couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, hell: Call me 'Spike.' Call me 'Shithead,' if you want to. We're going home!"

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"That's right," Jones said, his smile returning. "Going home. Can you live with *that?*"

"Yeah," Gray said. "I can live with that."

And he thought:

Monsters like us can live with anything. In the end, it just might be our only strength. ●

NEXT ISSUE

What if, when we finally get to the stars, we find that other human colonists from Earth had gotten there *first,* unbeknown to us, thousands of years before? That's the situation new writer **Tony Daniel** explores next month in his big, pyrotechnic new novella, "Candle," our fascinating June cover story. Centuries before NASA and the Apollo missions, long before Colombus had even landed in the New World, a group of Mississippian Indians, the so-called "Moundbuilder Indians," had discovered the mysterious substance they called "clay," a substance that enabled them to summon up and control the awesome cosmic forces that they personify as "*chocalaca* beings"—and, together with the *chocalaca,* had left Earth on an exodus to the stars. The wintry planet Candle had been settled by those Mississippian Indians centuries before... but now a *new* wave of human settlers has arrived, and one of them, Will James, the intrepid owner/editor of the *Candle Cold Truth,* finds himself plunged into the heart of a deadly conflict between the Indians and the newer settlers for control of the invaluable "clay," a conflict that will call his every loyalty into question, and one that may end up pitting him against his best friend, the Indian's spiritual leader, the mysterious and immensely powerful Thomas the Wanderer.... Fast-paced, audacious, eloquent, wildly inventive, full of dash and stylish *elan,* this is a vivid and colorful novella that will remind you of the best of early Zelazny... and one that will probably put Daniel on the map as a Writer To Watch in the '90s. One of our most popular writers, **James Patrick Kelly,** is also on hand for June, taking us to a troubled near-future for a gripping study of false friends, bad advice, and hard choices, in the taut and compelling story of what it feels like to be "Standing in Line with Mister Jimmy."

ALSO IN JUNE: **Alexander Jablokov** returns with the powerful story of a far-sighted man preparing a very unusual kind of "Living Will"; new writer **Mary Rosenblum** takes us back to the Drylands, a near-future American West where the water has finally and irrevocably run out, for another moving story of human hearts in conflict, in the bittersweet "Celilo"; **Isaac Asimov** uses the latest sprightly George and Azazel story to warn us that "Baby, It's Cold Outside"; the madcap **Eileen Gunn,** author of the gonzo classic "Stable *Strategies for Middle Management,*" returns with a sly, funny, and very strange little fable called "Lichen and Rock"; new writer **Lawrence Person** takes a hard look at the way a man can be haunted for the rest of his life by the "Consequences" of past choices; and multitalented **Alexis Gilliland,** whose cartoons have appeared here frequently in the past, makes his *fiction* debut in *IAsfm* with an acerbic and unsettling look at "The Man Who Invented Lawyers." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our June issue on sale on your newsstands on April 30, 1991, or subscribe today and miss none of the great issues we have coming up for you this year.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Realifantasy

The Interior Life
By Katherine Blake
Baen, $3.95 (paper)

In this age when it seems that every publisher is vying with every other publisher to see which can publish the greatest number of books of the most stultifying similarity, every once in a while a novel appears out of nowhere about which one can only wonder, "How did this get through the net?" Not particularly because it's brilliantly written or epic in concept, but because, usually in a modest sort of way, it's just plain different.

Katherine Blake's *The Interior Life* is one of these; it's also *sneakily* different. Sue is a perfectly ordinary modern American wife and mother with several interchangeable kids, a husband who is a manager for the Green Valley Road Sav-Mor discount shop and just slightly nerdish in a nice sort of way, and the usual problems of budget, how to get her husband the district managership, and whether she should be more active in the PTA. *Boring,* you say, and how right you are.

Marianella is the chief serving maid to the Lady Amalia, whose country, Demoura, the Land Beneath the Mountains, is very like medieval England but with quite a few differences including working magic. It's about three hundred miles long and two hundred miles broad, and slowly, year by year, is being taken over by the Shadow, a literal darkening of the land which brings its own people with it, the Darklanders (as well as other creatures of various sorts, the Shadowthings), who proceed to usurp it. Very slowly—it's been a couple of centuries now since it began — Demoura is losing the battle against the Shadow and its ruler, Imber.

It will come as no surprise that Sue and Marianella more or less share the same consciousness and are usually, if not always, aware of what the other is doing. (Sue also seems very privy to the Lady Amalia's thoughts and doings—the implication, perhaps, that Demoura is entirely of Sue's creation, but this, like much else, is left up to the reader to guess. In any other case, I'd have said, "is left infuriatingly ambiguous," but Blake has the amazing skill of being ambiguous without being infuriating.)

What is particularly intriguing about *The Interior Life,* and why

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it's not just another "housewife who wants to be a lady-in-waiting to an adventurous and romantic aristocrat" story, is the artful and close interweaving of the lives of the two women. Paragraph by paragraph, almost sentence by sentence, the two stories alternate; Sue's mundane life fending off her husband's lecherous co-workers and fretting about business parties, and the extraordinary adventures that Marianella and Amalia go through in saving their country.

One would think that each would get in the way of the other, and it should be noted that they are (for the most part) not in tandem, i.e., an event in Sue's life does not necessarily have an equivalent in Demoura (though sometimes the events are close, and Amalia's comments on various aspects of modern life are particularly amusing). Why Sue's mundane story achieves a particular glow from its tight interweaving with the other is a mystery to me, and why the adventures of the women of Demoura aren't simply dulled by Sue's saga is even more mysterious. Perhaps it's the constant surprise of the dizzying jumps from one reality to another, like watching trapeze artists:

" 'Good night,' Sue said, and went into the bedroom where Fred had hidden from the PTA and was waiting for her.

" 'This place,' Ulf said, raising his head, after a long silence. 'This place was once Kindaric.'

"Kindariel Amalia looked around her, trying to catch a glimpse of anything that might be let of the fabled city."

I realize that excerpts sound ludicrous, but the whole balancing act becomes a constant stream of surprises. It should also be mentioned that Blake's magic kingdom, Demoura, is not the usual wizards 'n' elves territory that we've become all too used to. She has managed to invest it with a true glamour (both the light and the dark sides of it) which gives it a magic ambiguity (that word again!) that restores my faith in magic kingdoms. Without Sue's mundane world interwoven into it, Demoura might be almost *too* baroquely fantastical; again, this may be part of the peculiar art that makes the novel work.

Whatever . . . *The Interior Life* is a small but authentic tour de force. It's just going to be a hard act to follow.

Tepper Topper

Raising the Stones

By Sherri S. Tepper
Doubleday, $19.95

Sherri Tepper's rise to prominence in fantasy and SF has been fairly rapid and a shade surprising. I say surprising because her first novels were minor and amusing light fantasies with a touch of originality about them. Then they got a little heavier in tone and weight, and while still idiosyncratic, seemed less original than just rather forced.

Then a couple of years back, there was a certain push toward

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Here is somebody that should be taken seriously. Now this sort of opinion can be circulated by publishers who think certain of their authors should be taken seriously even when nobody else does. But after reading her latest, *Raising the Stones,* I'm inclined to take her seriously (with a misgiving or two) indeed. It is a strange and mysterious book, not at all arcane or difficult page to page, chapter to chapter, but with an authentic originality to it.

It is set in a planetary system simply called the System, which has several satellites and small planetoids in a system belt that has been colonized by humans from varying societies; there are also several indigenous alien races. Transport is mostly by "Door" (matter transmitter).

At the heart of the novel is what amounts to a relatively small but mysterious event. The tiny world in the Belt called Hobbs Land is a "Farm Settlement World of Transystem Foods" and it is thoroughly pastoral with twelve settlements. When first explored, it was thought to be uninhabited, and it was only after settlement began that the native sentient alien race was discovered, turnip-shaped beings with fragile limbs. There were exactly twelve of them on the entire planet, and they all almost immediately died. Frantic efforts were made to at least record their expiring culture but little was accomplished. However, one of their gods, who lived in little round temples (there were only three or four of *them*) survived. The temple was preserved under the Ancient Monuments Panel of the Native Matters Advisory Authority, and nobody really noticed that for several decades, the human inhabitants of Settlement One, where the temple and its God (a largish rocklike object with mysterious sparkles in it) were located, were offering, in a small and matter of fact way, sacrifices, while the temple itself was adopted by a sort of human priest caretaker. In the business of getting a new settlement started over the years, nobody in authority seemed worried about this, and nobody at Settlement One bothered to say anything about it.

Then the God dies and the entire settlement mysteriously undergoes a period of psychological derangement. The caretaker priest also dies and is buried, with some alien material found on his body. Then the children of the community decide to restore the temple. . . .

From these puzzling and ambiguous events come further events which shake the entire System and its several political components, and there is no way in the world that there is room here to even give the ramifications of it all. But the ingredients are legion, including two—count 'em, two—planetary invasions. Not to mention two of the nastiest cultures ever invented: one human, based on slavery, genocide, and male domination; the other, alien, in which commu-

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nication is usually achieved by being swallowed and then regurgitated.

Tepper has come up with an antic novel that really defies description, but is nothing if not intriguing and can be faulted mainly for too much incident and too many characters. But better too fertile a novel than too barren a one. Incidentally, the title refers (in one aspect) to the discovery by Theseus of his father's sword and sandals, just to intrigue you a little more.

To Be Continued

The Dragon Revenant
By Katharine Kerr
Doubleday, $8.95 (paper)

One of the horrendous ramifications of the electronic media is that most people these days think nothing of watching a work of fiction on television in bits, pieces, or totally out of order. It began, I suppose, when customers would come in the middle of a movie and then stay and see the beginning, where it would never occur to the same person to start a book in the middle and then read the beginning of it. TV compounded the problem; here was a medium where you could watch any old slice of a movie (or play or whatever), see a bit here this month, another bit a year later . . . I've had discussions on various films with persons who, as it turns out, have only seen three fifteen minute sections of the movie spread out over two years, but who have very definite opinions about its quality.

This choleric sociological dissertation has almost nothing to do with Katharine Kerr's *The Dragon Revenant* except to emphasize that I thoroughly disapprove of fiction watched or read in bits and pieces. Given the number of series and interconnected stories and novels we're getting in fantasy and SF these days, this is getting easier and easier to do, particularly when careless publishers fail to mention that a book happens to be part of an ongoing series. Ms. Kerr's publisher, on the other hand, had made it very clear that *The Dragon Revenant* is one of a series laid in a mythical land called Deverry—the fourth, so far as I can judge. Nevertheless, I have read and will review it without having read the other three, a breach of principles for which I can only plead reasonable cause. One is that I was so taken with Ms. Kerr's first *science fiction* novel, *Polar City Blues,* that I couldn't resist seeing what her fantasy was like. The appearance of *The Dragon Revenant,* even though it was a continuation, seemed an apt opportunity. And, given that reading time is as precious as rubies to a reviewer, I just wasn't able to read the initial books in the series.

This did make for some problems, I admit. The situation is an ongoing one, and the familial, social, and political ramifications of the plot are rather complicated. But the magic world is neatly laid out. The two major human cultural groups are the Deverrians (read—

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very loosely—Celtic and magical) and the Bardekians, inhabitants of an island archipelago (read—very loosely—Graeco-Roman) who have little if anything to do with magic per se. There are also higher-up types ("Great Ones") who are connected with various elements and don't mix much with mere humans (at least in this novel), and the Wildfolk—sprites, gnomes, and other primitive beings who are very visible to the Deverrians and of whom the Bardekians are totally unaware. And then there are the elves—co-equal with humans and with whom they are able to interbreed (the main character of *The Dragon Revenant* is a mixed blood), but who play little part in this novel. The plot is primarily devoted to the recovery of Rhodry, the heir to a Deverrian throne who has been kidnapped, mind-wiped, and sold as a slave in Bardekia. The rescue expedition consists of Rhodry's elven half brother, Salamander, an engaging and clever character, helped by Rhodry's lover, Jill, a more than capable young woman. She has apparently been denying her talent for "Dweomar" (magic) for some time, but must confront it due to certain events during the trip (during part of which Salamander and his entourage masquerade as "The Great Krysello, King of the Cryptic, and his Mind Boggling Brace of Bizarre Barbarians"—Ms. Kerr is not without her sense of humor). And obviously Rhodry's kidnaping is part of a Larger Scheme of Things, which manages to involve wizards dark and light, secret brotherhoods, a gaggle of Wildfolk, and even some Great Ones. Despite some problems occasioned by my starting in the middle, as it were, I still read *The Dragon Revenant* with great pleasure—it has a solid fantasy background, engaging characters and a plot that is intricate without being tangled. Certainly Kerr can at this point be compared to that other Great Katherine—Kurtz—and her Deverry series can stand honorable comparison with the Deryni books.

Smörgasbord

Echoes of the Fourth Magic

By R. A. Salvatore
Roc, $4.50 (paper)

I'll say one thing for R. A. Salvatore's *Echoes of the Fourth Magic;* it's got a lot of ingredients. It starts aboard the world's most advanced submarine, the Unicorn, five miles deep in the Atlantic. The ship gets caught in a sort of undersea electrical storm which throws it into a cavern in the deepest spot in the Atlantic; this cavern is a sort of indoor Sargasso Sea which has not only ships, but those fighter planes lost in WWII in the Bermuda Triangle.

This, however, is but a stop on the way—due to the strange temporal properties of the Sargasso Cavern, the Unicorn comes to the surface badly mangled and with only five survivors to discover that they are twelve centuries in the future. Attacked by monstrous

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semi-human creatures with "pervadingly evil auras" (no questions here as to who are the bad guys), the small band of humans are overcome and knocked out, but revive in a marbled hall to be confronted by a being in a flowing white robe, whose eyes "held a flickering blue flame that radiated unbounded knowledge and serenity" (no questions here as to who are the good guys). He is, of course, carrying a scepter. This worthy proceeds to tell the survivors from our time the story of what has happened since. This includes a nuclear war, but "HE who is supreme was moved to pity," and he raised Ynis Aielle, isle of hope among the nuclear devastation, and brought in the Colonnae (of whom our robed friend is one) to guide the survivors.

However, around the seventh generation after this mess, due to the lingering curse of technology, mutated children were born that turned out to be the nasties that our brave band has already encountered. They were called talons and more or less took over. But then a second mutation came along, "whose joyous smiles curled unblemished by evil," and these turned out to be elves. Lord Umpleby, a human obviously influenced by the wicked talons, wanted to play Herod, but the elven children were saved by a good wizard named Rudy Glendower (some human wizards had been matriculated by the Colonnae) and the two races grew apart and at odds. Enter our submarine crew (who are, incidentally, as varied a lot as the crew of a World War II fighter plane movie) "the Ancient Ones, delivered unto the future land of Aielle to teach the new race of man the lessons of the past."

Needless to say, our Ancient Ones throw themselves into the fray with a vengeance as more and more ingredients get added to the stew. There's a lady (who is, of course, "*the* Lady"), a band of forest-wise rangers, and a winged horse. There's also a lot of dialogue of the "And ye come no from the land, for suren ye do'no know her ways. Troth be in seein, ye are standin proof to the Witching Prophetics" style of antique prose which I find as hard to read as it must be to write. All in all, I found just a bit too many disparate elements in Mr. Salvatore's smörgasbord, but those who like a speedy tale with a new ingredient every few pages, logical or not, will probably have a good time.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . A neat collection of three rare stories by Fritz Leiber in *You're All Alone*. There's the longish title story, almost a novel, and also "Four Ghosts in Hamlet" and "The Creature from Cleveland Depths" (Carroll and Graf, $3.95, paper).

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot . . . The Great Hunt is the second of Robert Jordan's "The Wheel of Time" cycle, a sequel to the quite enthralling *The Eye of the World* (Tor, $22.95).

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Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Slow Dancing Through Time,* stories by Gardner Dozois in collaboration with Jack Dann, Michael Swanwick, Susan Casper, & Jack C. Haldeman II (Ursus Imprints, 5539 Jackson, Kansas City, MO 64130, $22.00).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1499 Boul. de la Maisonneuve Est, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H2L 2B2. ●

& JUNE & CROON

We sit down here, looking up at the moon,
necks cricked back all uncomfortable,
with our thoughts of poetry & romance &
dancing silverware and silvery light,
but the moon doesn't affect us, not really
not even as much as it does clams,
sleeping in their mud,
dreaming mindless dreams set to
rhythm by a stone in the sky they'll never see
never even guess the existence of

And to us it's just a light in the sky
maybe we gaze at it for a minute or two, say gosh isn't
it beautiful behind wispy clouds or shining on the lake or
over the mountains
& then go on chattering inconsequentialities
& never even think to look up at it again

But it's a place, the moon, a place big as all Africa
big as all the world's deserts together and then some
harsh and rugged and cold as the mountains of
Antarctica
and as beautiful

a place with lonely footprints nearly forgotten,
tiny in the midst of vast cratered plains
where we have left behind our forgotten dreams

No, footprints are never lonely:
the loneliness is in us.

—Geoffrey A. Landis

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Con(vention)s seem to come in groups: three academic cons, and two in El Paso, TX. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE (say what it's for). When calling, say why right off. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard.

APRIL 1991

3–6—**Twentieth Century: Science & SF.** For info, write: **D. Terrel, 98 bd. Edouard Herriot, Box 369, Nice F-06007, France.** Or call **(703) 273–3297** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Nice, France (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests include: Brian W. Aldiss. Academic.

12–14—**Technicon. (703) 953-1214.** Va. Tech, Blacksburg VA. Diane Carey, J. "Fuzz Face" McMahon.

12–14—**FILKONtario.** Holiday Inn, Mississauga ON. Bill and Brenda Sutton. SF folksinging con.

19–21—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-6460.** Ellison, Poul Anderson, Niven, Pohl.

19–21—**ConDuit, 2566 Blaine Ave., Salt Lake City UT 84108.** (801) 467-9517. Barbara Hambly.

19–21—**EatonCon, Box 5900, U. of Cal., Riverside CA 92517.** (714) 787-3233. Another academic con.

19–21—**AmigoCon, Box 3177, El Paso TX 79923. (915) 593-1848.** L. S. & C. de Camp. Alan Gutierrez.

26–28—**DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322. (515) 270-1312.** The Haldemans, Synk, Chilson.

26–28—**Fantasy Arts Con, Box 8602, Boise ID 83702. (208) 454-2835.** Some horror/comics emphasis.

MAY 1991

3–5—**Corflu, 4740 N. Mesa #111, El Paso TX 79912. (915) 542-0443.** For traditional fanzine fans.

3–5—**ConTraption, Box 2285, Ann Arbor MI 48106. (313) 542-0526.** Fred Pohl, Bob Hillis, Liz Gross.

9–12—**EuroCon, % Bukato, Box 983, Warsaw 00-950, Poland.** P. Anderson. European continental con.

10–12—**MisCon, Box 9363, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 721-7999.** Barbara Hambly, William J. Warren.

13–15—**AlasCon, % Bodde, Alaska U., 10928 Eagle River Rd. # 228, Eagle River AK 99577.** Academic.

17–19—**Oasis, Box 616469, Orlando FL 32861. (407) 788-3014, 725-2383.** R. Asprin, the Passovoys.

AUGUST 1991

29–Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement. Powers. $125 to 7/15/91.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3–7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The '92 World SF Con. $75 to 3/31/91.

SEPTEMBER 1993

3–6—**ConFrancisco, Box 22097, San Francisco CA 94122. (916) 331-2491.** WorldCon. $50 in 1990.

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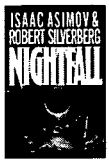

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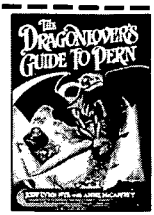

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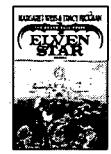

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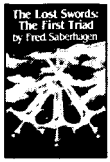

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